# Reality in Motion by Bookaholica

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**Summary:** Modern College AU. Socially awkward Jane Ives' first semester in college. aka: Not your typical boy-meets-drunk-girl-at-a-party Mileven fic. (I'm not that good at sumarizing, but please give it a shot!) Warning: this WILL be angsty as hell.

# 1. Changes

Chapter 1: Changes

**A/N: Hi everyone! After three long years of literary drought and the worst case ever of writer's block, Stranger Things Season 2 came along and my dead heart started hardcore shipping again. I have finally conviced myself to post this as a small contribution to the fandom. Anyway, I hope you like it!**

***Wednesday 29th, November 2017***

If there was something El Ives put her mind to, she was sure to accomplish it. Always.

Well, most of the times.

As a matter of fact, today was one of the few rare exceptions to that rule. This, since Will Byers, El's best friend, had managed to convince the otherwise socially awkward El to finally come with him that weekend to some party at a friend's house.

They were both currently seating on the beige colored carpet of her dorm room, supposedly trying to be productive by getting their History 102 assignment done before the due date.

"Pleeease El! I'm about to beg you, it's almost Christmas break and, for once, I'd like for you to come meet my friends and not stay locked up here again like a loser", Will had been pouting at his friend for over two hours.

"Hey, I happen to like being a loser", said El feigning indignation and scowling at her skinny best friend.

Will managed to hold back his smile at his oldest friend's antics and maintained a serious expression for the sake of getting his point across. They'd been friends since the age of twelve and both knew just how determined the other could be. Holding each other's stares defiantly in a silent challenge, neither of them wanted to give in.

As she stubbornly stared into Will's lively brown eyes, El suddenly

felt a wave of nostalgia wash over her. She had been having a few of those for a while now, especially whenever she thought back on their high school days on Hawkins High School. Actually, the biggest irony was thinking about how much she had looked forward to graduating and moving as far away as humanly possible from that hell hole she called hometown. Whereas, now, she couldn't help feeling strangely homesick. As a matter of fact, lately, El was often ambushed by random flashbacks from her teenage years and usually found herself wishing she could somehow go back and do it all better.

She regretted everything, actually, except for her friendship with Will.

Their friendship was yet another reason El kept thinking back in nostalgia to her high school days: even though Will and her had managed to get accepted into their dream college together and even lived in neighboring dorm buildings, she felt him more distant than ever before. Worse than that, El was painfully aware that *she* was the reason of the increasing (figurative) distance in their friendship and she loathed herself for it. Now, more than ever, she hated herself for her apathetic and awkward personality. Why couldn't she be a normal eighteen year old? Why couldn't she just stop feeling so nervous around other people? Because of this she was finally managing to drive her best friend away, her partner in crime, after being the closest of friends for over half a decade.

For most of their first semester at college she had declined Will's enthusiastic invitations to parties and any social events, preferring to skip them in favor of spending her afternoons in the solitude of her room either reading ahead or watching some movie or TV show. It was just easier that way, it seemed. El had never really been a social butterfly and she knew how much Will loved meeting and bonding with new people. So, she just figured that she could give him some space by making herself scarce.

However (and she'd never admit it out loud), as Will started spending less and less time with her and his invitations became rare occurrences, El began feeling terribly lonely (which was weird). She usually cherished her alone time, often glad she wasn't out there fake smiling and making small talk, getting emotionally drained after overthinking and worrying over every tiny detail of her social

interactions. Nonetheless, now, it just felt like a very different kind of loneliness.

El felt lonely in a bad way, a way she hadn't felt for quite a long time: the kind of lonely she used to feel before meeting Joyce Byers and befriending her son, Will.

Finally, after glaring at Will some more, El lowered her gaze in defeat. Mostly because she missed spending more time with him, and also because she was a bit curious about going to a college party.

"Ok. Fine, I'll go. BUT I'll only stay until a reasonable hour and you better not be dragging me up there so I can be your designated driver", answered El with an annoyed huff, hurling one of her fluffy pillows on Will's general direction and feeling quite annoyed (mostly at her pathetic, abnormal self).

Her friend easily managed to catch the pillow midair and offered El a sympathetic smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. She knew he was worried about her spending so much time by herself – the fact that she had no roommate made it easier for her to just hide away for hours on end without any excuse.

"I'm only doing this for your own good El, you know I look out for you and it's about time you start having a normal college experience and, you know, getting to know people. After all, the semester is almost over".

-….-…-…-

***Friday 1st, December 2017***

El bit her lip as she stared at her reflection on the mirror critically. Was her top too revealing? Was her midsection looking gross and bloated? Should she put any make up on? Was her hair ok? Were jeans and sneakers too casual for the party?

*Man, I badly needed a School of Life 101 crash course,* El thought with a groan.

It was always on times like this that El really wished she had a roommate or a best friend who could actually give advice on these

kinds of things. It was also on times like these that El regretted not learning about this stuff back on high school. Finally, after examining her reflection some more, she decided to change her sneakers in favor of her black leather boots and apply some lipstick to her dry lips.

Feeling quite nervous, she turned her phone screen on and was surprised to see several messages from Will.

8:02 pm U excited yet for your first college party?

8:03 pm Totally getting drunk as skunks 2nite.

8:46 pm Waiting for the guys, we're coming to pick u up

9:29 pm On our way, expect a call in 15

9:44 pm Almost there

9:59 pm Ok, let's go

*3 missed calls from MY FAVORITE PERSON IN THE WORLD*

10:03 pm Pick up the phone

10:11 pm We're waiting downstairs

10:27 pm What the hell u doing? We've been here for ages

El was surprised to find out how long she had taken to get ready, her nervousness was really not helping. As quickly as possible, she grabbed her tiny purse and keys and made her way out. At that very moment, her phone screen lit up and the contact name Will had programmed for himself popped up.

*incoming call from MY FAVORITE PERSON IN THE WORLD*

Smiling, El answered.

"I'm sorry, I completely lost track of time, that's all. I'm almost there", she said breathlessly while making her way down the flight of stairs.

"No problem El, just making sure you were still up for it", answered Will sympathetically.

"Wait. So did I actually have an option?" replied El only half joking.

She really was terribly nervous, like she always was whenever she had to face a new social situation.

Will laughed at her lame attempt at making a joke and was silent for a bit, maybe trying to empathize with his best friend's nervousness.

El could hear Will's friends talking loudly on the background:

"We need to hurry if we want to get wasted before the night ends, that's kind of the point of tonight", a loud male voice whined pathetically.

"Hey, I'm actually enjoying watching this show", another male voice answered in fake annoyance.

"Boooooooring", someone else interjected.

"You're too lame Wheeler", the first voice teased.

The conversation on the background grew faint as El realized Will must have walked away from his friends to talk to her privately.

"Everything will be fine and you'll have fun, you'll see. If you feel uncomfortable or something you have us", finally whispered Will before hanging up.

El had really tried to avoid meeting Will's friends for a while now, feeling resentment and jealousy towards them because her best friend spent most of his time with them now and talked all the time about how fun and loyal they were.

It actually made sense that they spent time together since they were all taking science related careers and had most of their classes together – Will was an engineer major, like Lucas, while Dustin and Mike were physics majors.

It was silly, she knew.

*Calm down El, it's going to be ok, Will's friends are probably as nice as him.*

Finally, El got to her building's common area. She saw four guys sprawled comfortably all over the beige couches, two of them were fighting over the remote and the other two were trying to watch whatever show was on TV.

They didn't notice her presence until she started timidly approaching Will, who was gazing at the screen with mild interest. He was the first one of the group to notice her and his face was instantly filled with a broad smile.

"You're finally here!" he exclaimed, startling everyone.

"Guys, this is El", Will said loudly. Then, pointing at each of the guys next to him, he introduced them, "These are Lucas, Dustin and Mike".

"Thanks for waiting", El managed to smile at them without making eye contact. She hoped they didn't notice her nervousness.

"No problem", said the smallest one of them, Dustin, "honestly, we were all dying to finally meet you".

"Yeah, we had a bet going on about Will's friend being imaginary", laughed Lucas.

Upon hearing that last comment, El snorted while trying to contain a laugh and turned to look at Will with amusement. Her friend merely shrugged.

"See how you make me look bad El?"

"Oh, it was only for the sake of making the bet more interesting", answered El with a laugh, "it would have been no fun without the mystery, now would it?"

The guys smiled, amused, and the air significantly relaxed. She felt a tiny bit more comfortable, and the voice in her head repeating her own doubts and fears in a loop grew quiet for the first time that night.

"So, who won the bet?" asked Will, looking at his friends.

"Me", said the tallest boy, Mike, smiling.

He was the only one who hadn't spoken up yet, but she recognized his voice from her phone call with Will – he was the one who claimed to be enjoying the TV show while they waited for her to arrive.

Overcome by curiosity, El risked a glance up at him and was surprised to find him already looking at her, matching her interest. They made eye contact.

"So thank you for being real, I guess", he said smiling kindly at her.

She quickly averted her gaze, not knowing what to do or how to respond, and tried to keep her upcoming blush from actually showing on her face. It wasn't even a compliment, why was she reacting like this?

Social awkwardness truly sucked.

There was a short moment of silence, which was (thankfully) quickly broken by Lucas.

"Ok, let's get going", said Lucas enthusiastically as he strode to the nearest exit.

-….-…-…-

***Saturday 2nd, December 2017***

She'd drank too much, too soon.

Of course, the fact that Will kept refilling her red solo cup with mysterious mixes of liquor didn't help at all. But she wasn't complaining at all. All things considered, El found the whole experience quite interesting. Actually, she was pleased to realize that the alcohol numbed that voice that constantly reminded her of all her insecurities and flaws. She found this quite liberating.

She felt like she could do anything. Be anyone she wanted.

Will's friends had left them to join a game of beer pong not so long ago, which had also helped El feel a whole lot more relaxed. Up until then, she had been too scared of acting like a weirdo around the guys and so she had barely talked.

For the first time in a long time, no worries or guilt lurked El's mind.

As time went by, the music surrounding her stopped being too loud and the vibration of the bass on the floor actually made her lively in a way she had scarcely felt before. Before she knew it, her foot was tapping the floor to the beat of the unknown song. She tried to pay attention to whatever Will was saying (maybe a funny story about someone in one of his classes? What was that about a teacher?), but words kept jumbling around making it hard for her to understand anything at all.

*My thought process is screwed up*, El thought.

Suddenly, it occurred to her that that was the funniest, wittiest thing she had ever come up with, so she giggled uncontrollably.

Will smiled affectionately at the giggling girl beside him. He had really tried to be a good friend that night, staying with her the whole time – probably suspecting that if she got to feel too awkward, she'd escape the party.

"I looooooove you so much Willy Will", said El hugging her friend, "do you know that?"

El's ears suddenly caught onto a tune, alerting her of something.

Something quite urgent.

*Do you recall, not long ago*
*We would walk on the sidewalk?*
*Innocent, remember?*
*All we did was care for each other*

"BYERS! COME ON!" she exclaimed giddily, standing up clumsily and dragging her skinny best friend to the middle of the room, "IT'S OUR JAM!"

*But the night was warm*
*We were bold and young*
*All around, the wind blows*
*We would only hold on to let go*

Will could only smile at her random behavior. He had never been a good dancer and he had not drank nearly as much as El had, so he just sort of awkwardly tried shuffling his feet and swaying his body to the catchy song.

"BLOW A KISS FIRE A GUN, WHEN YOU NEED SOMEONE TO LEAN ON", El was screaming while swaying her hips wildly, her eyes were closed, "BLOW A KISS FIRE A GUN, ALL WE NEED IS SMEBODY TO LEAN ON".

Will tried his hardest to keep up with El's moves, but she was like a woman possessed, jumping around and twirling in every direction. It seemed that all those months of pent up energy – probably gathered after all those afternoons of voluntary isolation – were finally finding an outlet. After a couple of songs and happy to see his friend finally having fun, Will decided his job there was done.

"El. El! EL!" he screamed to get her attention.

She faced him, smiling wildly. Her face shiny with sweat from the exertion and the warmth in the room. Will couldn't help mirroring her grin.

"I just can't keep up with you!" he said teasing her, "I'm gonna go find the guys".

El stuck out her tongue at him and waved goodbye.

"YOU'RE SUCH A KID ELEVEN!" Will exclaimed as he headed to the other room, where he last saw his friends heading to.

-….-…-…-

Her feet were killing her.

El made her way to the nearest sitting space she could find, a couch on the left side of the room. She sat down for a minute in the crowded couch, slowly trying to move her toes so she didn't feel them cramping anymore. She was currently sandwiched uncomfortably between a sleeping guy and a couple making out. She tried to ignore the snores and the sounds the couple were making.

She hadn't seen Will or any of his friends for at least a couple of hours and she was not about to go wandering off looking for them. Will was probably drunk by now, maybe talking to the cute guy from their History 102 class that he always rambled on about. El smiled fondly, remembering how much of a hopeless romantic her best friend was.

She tried laying back on the couch and closing her tired eyes, but everything was too hot and her feet hurt too much. It was way too uncomfortable.

El glanced hopefully at the glass doors that led into the balcony. With any luck, there wouldn't be anyone out there smoking.

She hated the smell of tobacco. It reminded her of *him*.

El shut her eyes tightly, desperately trying to chase away the memories that begged to be replayed on her mind, and massaged her throbbing temples. She tried to take a deep, calming breath and relax somehow, but the air felt too moist and everything smelled like alcohol and sweat. Suddenly, she was too aware of the extremely loud music and the annoying presence of the people around her. And there were too many people. Too many unfamiliar faces. Frustrated, El opened her eyes slowly, glancing around at the room full of strangers.

Dejection filled her thoroughly, tonight had been great so far and she just happened to ruin it by opening a door she had closed more than five years ago. She'd promised it would never haunt her, never hurt her again. But it was always there, lurking. It was always *him*, never allowing her to escape his choking grip.

Without even thinking about it, she had started walking on the opposite direction of the balcony, towards the main door of the house. As she stepped outside of the house, she couldn't help noticing the wide brown door was ajar. El moved forward taking slow, deliberate steps, knowing her balance was far from being the most stable.

She glanced around quickly.

Sighing in relief at the fact that she had apparently managed to escape the smokers, El leaned on the nearest wall and stared off into the darkened streets and houses. Her body still felt light, but most the energy she had at the beginning of the night had ebbed away by now, leaving her exhausted. Soon enough, she noticed that the volume of the music and the noise from the house was once again bearable for her. However, without the loud (loud! loud!) music infecting her thoughts, she was left at the mercy of the familiar cold voice in her head: it was her own voice, but ruthless and emotionless, and it never tired of always repeating everything she didn't want to hear.

She wondered what time it was, she was too lazy to get her phone out and check the time. Her fuzzy brain was making everything a lot harder.

"You ok?" a familiar voiced questioned.

El found herself staring up into the freckle-covered face of one of Will's friends.

"Just tired and hot", she replied, "it's like a freaking oven in there".

He just chuckled.

"Why are you out here?" she suddenly asked.

"Oh, just getting some air to clear my head", the tall guy answered shrugging, "I am the lucky soul who gets to be the designated driver for tonight".

El smiled in amusement.

*His name is Mike*, El suddenly remembered, her scattered, hazy thoughts becoming a tiny bit clearer.

"You know, I was convinced the only reason Will invited me here was so I'd have the honor of being the DD".

They remained in a comfortable silence for a while, both staring off and busy with their own thoughts.

"Will is worried about you", Mike stated after a while.

"I know", El answered sadly, "it's just hard for me, you know?"

Mike furrowed his brow in confusion.

"No matter how hard I try, it's hard for me to feel comfortable or relaxed or even normal around new people or in new places", she explained almost in a whisper.

"It's ok to feel that way", he said like it was the most natural thing in the world, his gaze showing empathy.

El snorted, fully aware that no, it was not okay to be such an introverted freak. She was not stupid. She knew it was a limitation, something that held her back from experiences and people and things she really wanted. She was all too aware that it was what isolated her from everyone and ultimately stood like a solid barrier, shielding her even from the ones she deeply cared about.

"I felt very lonely coming here at first", Mike confessed smiling crookedly in her direction, "I consider myself a lucky guy, having Dustin as a roommate and meeting Lucas and Will on my first week here".

"Will is an amazing friend", El answered smiling, "and all of you seem like pretty cool guys", she added honestly.

Mike blushed a bit and lowered his gaze, focusing on his wristwatch.

*Who even owns a wristwatch these days?,* wondered El with amusement as she glanced at him with the corner of her eye.

"Hey, it's barely 1 am, how do you feel about going for a drive and coming back to pick up our friends' drunken asses?" suddenly asked Mike.

**A/N: What do you think so far? Please let me know if you think I should continue.**

## 2. Clearest Blue

***A/N: Thanks to those of you who took the time to comment on the last chapter.***

Chapter 2: Clearest Blue

***Still Saturday 2nd, December 2017***

They were laughing at Mike's silly childhood stories as they slowly drove around their tiny college town, with no real destination. El could not remember the last time her jaw hurt as much just from laughing unstoppably. It was certainly weird that she could allow herself to feel so relaxed around a stranger, getting so absorbed by his funny anecdotes and the cute way he liked to move his hands around when talking.

*Stupid El, stop thinking crap. You can't really describe a* movement *as* cute*, it's probably just the alcohol.*

"And then… and then," Mike said breathlessly in between high pitched laughs, "Dustin and I went to school, all cool and confident, you know? We were so ready for the cool kids to let us sit at their table, for Jennifer Hayes to glance in our direction, for our picture to be taken and featured on the yearbook..."

"Little did we know that they'd cancelled the dress-up for Halloween that year," he added making a face.

"Oh God," El grumbled smiling, "that must've been so awful".

"It was," Mike conceded shaking his head in disbelief, "I don't even know how my self-esteem managed to survive that," he chuckled.

"Anyway, so what's the most embarrassing thing that's ever happened to you?" he asked, "I'm probably driving you nuts with all this talking".

El was quiet for a second, thinking about her answer, remembering her school days.

"Ok... So not even Will knows about this one, it was before I even met him. That means you tell anyone about this and I'll make that Halloween 2007 day seem like a chill day in the park," she said looking at him dead in the eye, trying to maintain a serious façade but failing miserably, a huge grin finally appearing on her face.

Mike rolled his eyes, faking indignation.

"So I open up and bare my darkest, deepest secret to you… and you threaten me?" he asked dramatically.

"It's just that my story is not cute like yours," she answered with a snort, "it's just…"

She went quiet for a bit.

*Maybe this is not a good idea.*

"Do you still want to hear it?" she asked feeling very vulnerable.

He took away his eyes from the road for a second and nodded. El could clearly sense how genuinely interested he seemed about what she was going to tell. He had really been great company all that time, El realized, feeling glad they ran into each other earlier. She sighed.

"So, the summer before the fifth grade they moved me to a new place in another town, with new kids and, well, it was no surprise that they pretty much hated my guts," El continued quietly after a short silence, looking at her lap, "some night during my second month there, I went to sleep and they set me up."

"I woke up the next morning with sharpie drawings all over my face and bubble gum all over my hair… the sharpie eventually washed off in a couple of days but my hair was ruined, they had to chop it all off".

"And yeah, you can imagine how it was to attend a new school with a shaved head," she finally trailed off, blushing and almost immediately regretting sharing that with him.

El could feel the tears tickling the corners of her eyes and hated herself for her weakness. She was supposed to be over that stupid

childhood memory. She was supposed to be stronger now, and able to laugh about it now, like Mike had at his own stories.

*He will think the only reason I told him my sob story is to make him feel bad for me,* she thought with worry, *why do I always have to ruin the conversation by being such a mopey weirdo?*

After a bit, El felt the car finally stop. She looked out the window, watching the houses and the shadows of people's lives inside them. El had refused to look at Mike during the remainder of the ride, fearing she would see pity in his eyes.

*This is the reason why you have no friends*, the cold voice inside her head whispered maliciously.

"I think what makes your story better is the fact you went to school anyway. I mean, you didn't escape from that horrible situation like anyone else would," Mike finally said.

El could feel his dark eyes boring into the side of her head and she slowly turned around to face him. His eyes were sympathetic and kind, but they did not hold a trace of pity. She exhaled slowly, all worry evaporating from her, and released a breath she didn't even know she was holding in.

He smiled at her.

"Do you feel like getting ice cream?" asked Mike suddenly, "I know a place that might still be open".

"What the hell are we waiting for?" she couldn't help laughing and shaking her head incredulously.

The car engine roared back to life with a purr and they drove around slowly, listening to a vintage radio station and pointing out random details of the houses and neighborhoods they passed ("I wonder whose shoes are those on that porch", "why would anyone still buy garden gnomes?", "can't believe someone actually puts that kind of political propaganda on their home", "this is the best garden yet, I wonder who has all that free time to tend to it"). Spending time with Mike was comfortable, and it felt oddly… homey? (El was convinced

she'd never used that adjective to describe her feelings before).

*Waiting in a car*
*Waiting for a ride in the dark*
*The night city grows*
*Look and see her eyes, they glow*

They promptly fell into a comfortable silence, listening to the relaxing music. Without really wanting to, she closed her eyes and, soon, El was almost giving in to sleep. Suddenly, the car jolted softly as Mike parked and stopped it in front of a restaurant with a huge blue sign that read IHOP.

He turned around to grin at El and she couldn't help but to mirror his joyful expression.

"Ok, I know I said ice cream, but you'll definitely like this better," he said excitedly. "Here we can order breakfast anytime of the day, and breakfast is the best meal of the day!"

El looked at him in awe, dazzled by the fact that this guy never ceased to impress her.

Being really nice was one thing, but sharing her exaggerated love for breakfast? That was something that actually made her feel a little funny on the inside, like she wanted to cry and laugh at the same time.

*Alcohol sure affects me more than I expected.*

"Waffles?" El asked hopefully, already feeling her mouth watering at the thought of eating warm, syrupy goodness.

"Come on!" he said rushing out of the car.

-….-…-…-

Mike cautiously glanced over at the brunette girl peacefully sleeping on the passenger seat, and couldn't help the goofy grin from spreading all over his angular face. Mike hadn't really expected much from tonight, imagining it would be nothing other than mildly interesting, especially considering he had to stay sober to be able to

drive the guys around. Actually, he never had considered himself a party animal and only agreed to come out to these kind of parties when his friends insisted. But they'd had fun and he was glad he'd gotten the chance to actually know her better.

He finally got out of the car after a short while, waiting for the song on the radio to finish – it was one he'd never heard before and coincidentally quite fitting to his mood.

Yeah, he was actually pretty much obsessed with music.

As expected, he immediately found Dustin passed out drunk out in the front yard.

Though, while it did make a pretty hilarious picture to see the stocky boy shirtless and lying awkwardly on the middle of the garden, Mike knew for a fact he would probably need help hauling him into the car and getting him up to their dorm on the fourth floor. He hoped Lucas and Will were still sober enough to be up for it.

He found a mildly sober Lucas on the living room, in the middle of what seemed like a heartfelt conversation with a cute redhead girl (was she the girl from their physics class he always talked about?). Will, however, was trickier to find. After about half an hour of searching every room he could think of and calling him on the phone, Mike was almost convinced his friend had already gone home.

"Hurry up you asshole! It's been half an hour already!" a very annoyed girl screamed, pounding at the bathroom door.

Mike stopped on the middle of his way through the hallway, unsure.

"Do you know whoever's in there?" he asked.

"A scrawny guy with a red jacket," she answered, "do you know that jerk?"

Mike called Will's phone once again and his friend's unmistakable Star Wars ringtone blared from inside the bathroom. Sighing, Mike backed a few steps, ready to kick the door open and hoping it would budge without damaging the hinge (he always felt sorry for the people who had parties and their homes were trashed by drunk

strangers).

The door opened.

Inside, Will was sitting on the shower floor, staring off into nothingness. Mike kneeled next to his friend and shook him vigorously.

"Will! Will! Let's go!"

His eyes refocused a bit.

"About fucking time you left! Do you know this is the only available bathroom?!"

They went to get Lucas, who was reluctant to leave but grumpily followed them because he had little chance of getting another ride home. Shortly after, the three guys carried a sleeping Dustin into the backseat of the car and were ready to leave. Not very long after, Will's and Dustin's snores echoed through the car.

"What happened to Will?" wondered Mike, "I found him in almost in shock, locked in the bathroom".

"Well, we all know he's a weird-ass drunk," Lucas snickered, remembering the time they looked for Will for hours and finally found him sitting on the roof of the house they were in, and the time he'd hidden himself in their building's storage closet for forty-five minutes.

"And what about you Lucas? Had a good time?" he asked, teasing his friend.

Mike saw Lucas' obvious blush through the rearview mirror and grinned, it was rare to see his usually serious friend flustered.

"Oh shut up, I don't even think she likes me that way," he replied with annoyance, trying not to make his disappointment too evident.

The guys went quiet for a bit, each thinking about how the night had turned out. Suddenly, Will jumped in his seat, as if something had burned him, his peaceful sleeping expression changing as he gasped

into wakefulness.

Lucas shrieked in surprise.

Mike almost had a mini heart attack.

"I did not see El for a while! How did she turn up here?! God I'm such a terrible friend! I just got so caught up and then saw her here and figured all was well… I fell asleep! And didn't even ask... I'm so sorry, I knew how nervous she was about tonight, about parties, about meeting you guys about drinking, why did I let her drink so much? WHY?! I should have been there for her!" Will rambled really fast, his concern evident.

He took a deep breath. Lucas seemed utterly confused, he had completely forgotten about Will's quiet friend.

"How and where did you find her? Was she ok?" Will asked a little bit less agitated, worry still showing in his every word.

"Yeah, she was ok. I found her outside the party and she was tired, said her feet hurt," Mike answered nonchalantly, trying to calm his friend down, "she fell asleep right away".

He saw Will visibly relax and let out a huge relieved sigh. Mike wasn't sure why he wasn't telling his friends the whole story of how his evening had gone, of the time he spent with El.

Well, he did know why he preferred not talking about it. Deep down.

He knew Will could sometimes read too much into things and Lucas would just want to get him back for commenting about his crush on the redhead (they were so annoying when they wanted to be). And those were the last things Mike wanted to hear right now, when everything had just gotten so complicated. Plus, it really wasn't like that… like how Will and probably Lucas would interpret it.

The night hadn't even been something special, worth feeling embarrassed or guilty or excited about, nothing out of the ordinary had happened. But it was something Mike felt he had to keep a secret. There was no real reason to save it for himself, except he wanted to. Somehow, he knew El would probably feel the same way

(maybe because of the drunken confession she shared with him?).

-….-…-…-

Since El's dorm building was of the oldest ones and it was closer to campus (while their building was on the other direction), Mike drove there first.

"El? We're going to your place first," he commented aloud and immediately felt stupid, knowing she was fast asleep. He hoped his friends were either too drunk or asleep and wouldn't comment on that.

Once he parked the car, he glanced behind him at the suspiciously calm yet somewhat noisy backseat. He was not at all surprised to see his three friends snoring loudly, especially Dustin who made a funny growling sound.

Chuckling quietly, he got out of the car and walked to El's side.

Mike opened the door, half expecting the cold gush of wind to awaken her, but she only turned her head away from the street and continued sleeping. Mike gently tapped her right shoulder, trying to awaken her and failing. She was a rather heavy sleeper, it seemed. As he looked at her, wondering what to do in this situation, Mike couldn't help noticing the cute way her long dark lashes fluttered in her sleep, the streetlight casting shadows on her face making her look mysterious.

*She is already mysterious enough*, he thought thinking about how shy she was and what Will had said about her being nervous about meeting them and going to the party tonight.

"Wake up El, we're at your dorm."

Sighing, he shook her again. Her big brown eyes finally opened, the light from the street and the cold air annoying her. She furrowed her brow, looking confused for a moment, and then her gaze zeroed in on him. Her whole demeanor relaxed and she smiled.

"I'm sorry to bother but we're home… I mean we're at *your* home, which is not really your home since it's only a temporary residence

for college, but of course you know what I meant-" he rambled, embarrassing himself with every word.

"Hey, to you too," she interrupted with a soft voice, finding his babbling sort of amusing.

Not noticing Mike's flaming blush at all, she tried getting out of the car but her legs were pretty much unsteady. Mike grabbed her elbow gently and helped steady her; then, they slowly walked together to the common area of her dorm building.

Her legs were feeling very wobbly – probably due to all the power dancing and the slight heel of her leather boots – and she was convinced they could give away at any minute. El bit her lip with worry, thinking she wouldn't be able to make it all the way up the seven flights of stairs to her room on her own. No freaking way.

*Stupid broken elevator*.

She glanced at Mike with the corner of her eye. Would it be ok for her to ask him to help her on her way up? Was it normal behavior from someone you just met? El felt her cheeks warming furiously: the last thing she wanted was Mike figuring out how much of an awkward weirdo she actually was.

"Does this thing even work?" Mike asked, pressing the elevator button several times impatiently.

Apparently, they'd reached the old thing without El even noticing, being too lost in her thoughts.

"It never worked, I think most of the older dorms have the same problem," she answered.

"Oh"

El made her way to the door that led to the staircase, unable to muster the nerve to ask him to come up with her. However, almost immediately after, she heard him shuffling behind her, hurrying to catch up. El couldn't stop herself from grinning dopily.

He helped her make her tortuous way up the stairs, which seemed to

be endless. He was such a good guy.

"Is this some kind of punishment? WHAT did I ever do to deserve THIS?" El asked hysterically after a while, realizing they'd barely made it half of the way. Ten minutes later, she all but collapsed down onto a sitting position in the middle of her way up the stairs. Her feet were killing her.

Mike chuckled.

"Never pinned you down for a drama queen," he said good-humoredly, sitting down to join her on the middle of the stairs. His long legs folding comically.

Too tired and uncomfortable to even care anymore, she kicked off her black leather boots and groaned with relief and pleasure when she felt her toes stretch into their natural position again. The cool temperature soothed most of the pain. It felt amazing.

"So…why do people call you Eleven?" Mike suddenly asked.

"I've been *dying* to ask you that and worried it might be rude somehow," he continued, looking at his lap.

El turned and looked at him, barely hiding her horrified expression. Her whole body felt frozen all of a sudden and her feet started hurting all over again. She felt a ginormous weight settle on her lower stomach.

*Of course he would ask. Stupid El, you had this coming.*

El seldom ever talked about it, especially not with strangers or people she just met. Which was sort of ironic, since strangers were always the first to ask the dreaded question and, every time, she would ignore them. She wondered why none of the guy had asked when Will introduced them earlier, she had allowed herself to forget it. To forget where she came from and who she was. To forget how much of a weirdo she really was.

Actually, she'd only told two people about it. Joyce Byers, the school psychologist and her son Will. And she'd told Will about it only after several weeks of meeting him, worried that he would treat her

differently once he knew.

At Hawkins she had only been plain Jane Ives, the quiet girl. At Hawkins, no one at school knew about her past. Also, unlike the kids at the children's homes she'd lived in, the kids from Hawkins Middle School did not treat her differently or bully her, they just left her alone… However, life was far from being perfect or even pleasant: she still had to deal with *him* and his sick ways.

And sometimes *he* would randomly call her by her old humiliating nickname, face mocking her, cruel voice prodding her, twisted mind seeking a reaction from her.

*He* knew exactly what kind of effect it had on her and he seemed to enjoy her pain and discomfort.

It had been Joyce Byers, the school psychologist, who told her that embracing and accepting could sometimes be more helpful than spending one's life resenting and hating and wanting to change all that had gone wrong.

After thinking about it for a while, she had made up her mind and followed Joyce's advice and actually won (the unspoken war she had going on with *him*): by coming to terms with the nickname and the baggage that it implied, she was also refusing to let *him* have even more power over her.

She'd been Eleven ever since. Eleven Ives, a survivor. El Ives the girl who managed to move on against all odds.

It actually made her proud to think of herself like that. It made her feel brave and strong (something she seldom felt about herself).

"…But then I thought, hey, you got to admit there's some trust in a friendship when you share childhood stories with each other," Mike continued to talk, still looking down.

As soon as he lifted his gaze to look at her, Mike's face fell.

She had been completely blocking him out, too immersed in her own memories to be able to pay attention to her actual surroundings.

Clearly noticing the shift in her mood, he started babbling again.

"Uh, it's ok if you don't want to talk about it, it's actually totally fine, it was just a stupid question, let's just forget it, I'm so sorry, really, even my mom says I'm too curious for my own good and-"

She felt something warm and weird settle in the pit of her stomach and smiled despite herself (this night had to be the one with the record of most El smiles ever).

"The box they found me in as a baby was labeled with a huge number 11," she finally answered interrupting his adorable babble.

"The kids from the children's home never let me outlive or forget about it," she added in an almost inaudible murmur.

She was almost hoping he wouldn't hear it, but, funnily enough, she also trusted him enough to let him know.

"But I don't mind anymore, I'm not ashamed of being an orphan. Plus, I actually like Eleven better than my boring real name."

El knew everything she'd just said was the truth but, all of a sudden, an all too familiar flood of emotions invaded her with the force of a tidal wave. It made her mourn for what she hadn't, didn't, and would never have: a family of her own. El found herself wishing she could somehow remember something nice she could share with Mike for once. Something normal, something endearing. Anything.

Just something pleasant to tell this nice guy who shared her weird love for breakfast. She felt tears beginning to prickle the corner of her eyes and hid her face in her hands, ashamed.

It made her even sadder to realize that she had no normal childhood anecdotes, no endearing stories, no cute nicknames, nothing. She had nothing, nothing worth sharing.

*You have nothing to give, which is why you deserve to be alone.*

They sat in silence for a while.

"Did I ever tell you my nickname throughout middle and high

school?" Mike asked with an amused snorty laugh.

He glanced at her nervously. She stared up from her hands, looking back at him from under her wet lashes. Unexpectedly, he took one of her hands in his and shook it gently.

"Frog-Face, enchanted to meet you".

A half giggle, half sob escaped her throat. She winced at the weird gurgling sound that came out, feeling absolutely mortified. But Mike laughed good naturedly at it, seeming happy enough of his success at lifting the mood.

-….-…-…-

Their laughter was echoing around them louder than they'd expected because of the acoustics of the empty place.

Feeling lighter, El stood up. They'd talked until her feet had stopped hurting almost at all, so she would have no problem walking upstairs.

However, as she began to climb the stairs, she felt his warm hand on her back, steadying her, still looking out for her. El couldn't help leaning back into his touch, her body too aware of his innocent contact.

Finally, they got to her floor and he walked with her down the hall until she stopped at the door to her room. On an impulse, El turned towards the tall boy and reached up to kiss him on the cheek.

Her slightly dry lips brushing the left corner of his mouth ever so slightly.

"You're officially the nicest, most awesome guy I've ever met," she said shyly and hurriedly ducked inside her darkened room, promptly closing the door, not giving him the chance to answer.

**A/N: Let me know what you think so far! Your comments give me much needed motivation.**

# 3. Something like this

Chapter 3: Something like this

***Monday 4th, December 2017***

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The pencil was repeatedly hitting the table. It was rather annoying.

"Could you stop that?" a girl asked dryly.

Trying to focus on the book she was currently reading, El was completely oblivious to the girl's question and continued tapping the pencil on the wooden library table. She'd already reread that paragraph several times, and yet she couldn't seem to come up with a coherent sentence to summarize it.

It was very difficult to concentrate on books and notes when her thoughts kept stubbornly wandering off from academics and reminding her of something she still was too embarrassed to allow herself to think about. She felt her cheeks starting to warm and, for what felt like the thousandth time that day, chastised herself for her own stupidity. She needed to stop thinking about Mike Wheeler.

"Ohmygod, are you freaking deaf?" the girl tapped her shoulder.

Startled by the sudden touch that wrenched her away from her restless mind, El almost jumped off from her chair and barely managed to stifle a shriek. El looked at the annoyed redhead girl with huge, clueless brown eyes.

The girl's angry face fell, probably feeling guilty because of her aggressiveness.

"Just stop the noise, ok? The table is not a drum set," the girl said with an almost guilty tone of voice, looking away quickly.

-….-…-…-

El had finally finished the chapter summary notes. Feeling quite

accomplished and hungry after spending most of her afternoon studying, she stretched her cramped limbs and gathered her stuff.

The girl who had startled her was still there, sitting next to her and frowning, nose-deep in a bulky book. El wondered whether she should apologize or something. Truth was, most of the times, she felt completely clueless about how to act in certain social situations and this was no exception.

Just as she stood up to leave, the girl looked up at her.

"Hey, I'm so sorry about how rude I was earlier, but you and your drumming skills were annoying the heck outta me and I'm having trouble as it is with the stupid reading material", she said, speaking really quickly.

"Anyway, I would hate to finish my first semester here making an enemy," she continued, grimacing wryly at that.

"I get it. I also have trouble concentrating," El answered cautiously, feeling very nervous. She tried to avoid looking at the girl's piercing blue eyes.

"So, are you leaving already? To have dinner?" she asked, while saving her books in her maroon backpack.

Just when El opened her mouth to reply, the girl stood up too.

"Mind if I tag along," somehow she managed to avoid phrasing it as a question.

*This is going to be so awkward.*

Having no other option after that, Eleven nodded and followed the feisty girl down the silent hall.

They both got out from the library together and walked towards the cafeteria. The girl – who introduced herself as Max Mayfield – immediately started complaining about her Government and Politics class ("I hate watching the news! I get bored listening to candidate speeches! WHY did I even chose this class to waste my extra credits in? ... I guess it'll remain one of life's biggest mysteries").

Apparently, the redhead girl was kinesthetically intelligent – which explained her mechanical engineering major –, and that made the whole situation a lot more unexplainable and bizarre. Max was obviously one of those very fun, active, and talkative persons. It didn't cease to amuse her how the redhead could quickly jump from one topic of conversation to another tirelessly. Much to her surprise, El found herself laughing along with her witty remarks and actually finding her really likable.

She was quite entertained by Max's sarcastic humor and loud personality. Also, the redhead seemed unfazed by Eleven's shyness and overall quietness, which was unexpected and really nice.

Listening to someone else's problems helped her take her mind off what had happened that weekend and stopped her from paying attention to the cruel voice of her insecurities. As opposed to what she had been first expecting, El found the whole situation made her feel rather perky and comfortable.

"By the way, I've seen you before?" Max asked.

"I don't thi-"

She interrupted her midsentence, and it suddenly dawned on El that Max was a big fan of rhetoric questions.

"Of course! You were that girl at Steve's party!"

"*That* girl?" El asked, unsure about whether she should be offended or not.

"Yeah, the one with the rad dance moves."

She blushed and couldn't help smiling at that, remembering her sore feet and legs the morning after the party. Tentatively, she finally allowed herself to think about what she had been avoiding for almost three days now.

*It really was an awesome night…*

"Do you know Lucas Sinclair?" Max suddenly asked. "Wait. Why are you blushing? Do you like Lucas?"

El snapped back to reality.

"Wh-What? Will's friend Lucas? Lucas the tall, serious guy?"

Max only stared at her with her mouth slightly agape.

"I don't like him, I barely know him!" El answered a bit too fast, it really was the most stupid question in the world.

Max, however, still sported a suspicious expression.

*If she only knew.*

"Why? Do *you* like him, Max?"

Now it was Max's turn to blush.

"Oh, shut up," she said looking away, "I haven't finally made a friend I actually find interesting so that we sit here gossiping about boys like it's fucking high school".

El couldn't agree more.

-….-…-…-

***Thursday 7th, December 2017***

*3 missed calls from MY FAVORITE PERSON IN THE WORLD*

9:03 am WHY DON'T U PICK UP THE PHONE?

*1 missed call from MY FAVORITE PERSON IN THE WORLD*

11:47 am U WORRY ME

*2 missed calls from MY FAVORITE PERSON IN THE WORLD*

She knew she couldn't avoid him anymore.

Even though she had been successful until then – having Max as a friend had come in quite handy –, Will and her had class together on Thursday afternoons. History 102 was the class Will took as an elective just to be with her. The only way to avoid her best friend

was skipping class. And El Ives never cut class. It had been hard enough getting into college with a scholarship to feel careless enough to do something like that.

Worst thing was, she wasn't even sure why she felt so mortified about the possibility of Will saying or asking something about the party. It wasn't like she was hiding something. Nothing major had really happened. Had it?

*An innocent kiss goodbye on the cheek means nothing.*

But there was nothing innocent about the weird way she felt when she remembered the feel of his big, warm palm steadying her. The cute way his dark wavy hair fell on his face, almost covering his eyes. The funny tilt of his head when he was listening to something that interested him.

*Cut it out El. You're making this a much bigger deal than it is like you always do. Heck! THERE IS NOT EVEN A "DEAL" TO TALK ABOUT.*

It hurt her to listen to the ruthless voice in her head, but, as much as she hated to admit it, El knew it was probably right.

It had happened countless times before. Well, actually two. Two times in which El found herself feeling funny and giddy and hopeful about someone, only to be disappointed. It always ended that way. She was destined to be alone and it was probably for the best.

*It's probably because of all that rom-com trash you watch all the time.*

She felt so guilty. Guilty about her stupid feelings, about her stupid thoughts, about her stupid hope, about her stupid attitude, about her stupid irrational fear for something that wasn't even happening.

Worst of all, she knew her internal crisis was really no reason to be such a shitty friend to Will. He was the one who had always, always been there for her and now she was hiding things from him?

She was such a mess.

"Ellie? You ok?" Max asked with concern, looking at her expectantly.

This was the first time she ever called her 'Ellie'.

Max had been so relieved to find a girl she actually found likable – most of the students in her classes were boys and she had gotten tired of only having male friends – and El was just as happy to have someone as nice, understanding, and extroverted as Max being her friend – also, apparently, she'd needed Max in her life to "coach her on stupid girly things that are totally dumbass but, sadly, necessary to survive in this society".

Noticing Max's concern, El was successfully distracted away from her restless thoughts and looked up from her phone to face her new friend's scrutinizing gaze. She was all too aware of the guilt written all over her face.

"Yeah, it's just Will", she replied to Max's question (for once without being interrupted!), biting her lip.

Max looked thoughtful. Despite their short friendship, the girls spent most of their free time together and knew a lot about each other so far. Max had even introduced Eleven to some of her closest friends. Of course, later, when El had mentioned her high school best friend and his friends, Max was very excited to meet them too (Eleven suspected it had something to do with her friend's vehemently denied fondness of Lucas Sinclair). Therefore, El had to confess to Max that she was actively avoiding Will.

"Alright", she said crossing her arms, "I think it's finally time for you to spill the beans about why you are avoiding him."

El looked away, trying to focus on anything other than Max's stern face. She knew her friend only intended for the best, but she was way too embarrassed to tell her about her childish crush on Mike Wheeler.

"I think it's not healthy, El", Max continued, "The poor guy is probably worried sick".

"I know! Ok?! This whole situation is affecting me so much too", El finally confessed, letting all of her anxiety pour into her words.

Her hand trembling as she adjusted her shoulder-length wavy hair

behind her ear.

"I'm so freaking worried I'll lose my best friend over a *stupid crush* of all things. And everything, because I cannot stop thinking about what will happen the next time Will asks me to hang out with them", El finally gushed out, completely unable to stop herself from revealing the reason behind her distress.

"WHOAH", Max's shocked blue eyes were wide as saucers, "HOLD. THE HELL. ON."

El tried to mentally prepare herself for the upcoming inevitable onslaught of questions.

"So you *do* like Lucas?"

*W H A T.*

El let out a giggle and then started full on laughing unstoppably at her friend's confused expression. She couldn't breathe.

*What the hell?*

Her stomach was contracting painfully at her effort to stop laughing.

"No", she finally admitted after her laugh subsided enough for her to talk.

"I have a crush on Mike Wheeler".

-….-…-…-

"Hey! What's going on with you?" asked Will, plopping down on the chair beside her, "I almost thought you were dead".

Too nervous to stay still, she'd come super early to the History class she had with Will.

She had spent almost all lunch time telling Max about what happened at the party. However, contrary to what Eleven had expected, Max had insisted that it seemed obvious to her that Mike Wheeler was as interested as El was.

She also stressed that she thought El's crush on him was not stupid. Nonetheless, El could not help feeling scared of the gush of hope she felt at her friend's encouraging words. Hope was never good.

Plus, the possibility of something actually happening made everything a little bit harder. It made El's mind wander off into cheesy fantasies she never had allowed herself to have before. It made the fluttering in her stomach a whole lot worse. It made her feel nervous and jittery and girly. And it scared her because it was new.

It made Eleven feel a lot unlike her usually phlegmatic self.

She turned to look at her best friend and couldn't help the guilty blush from spreading on her cheeks.

"I made a friend – well actually she made me her friend…" said El, smiling at the memory of her new lively friend, "and, well, I've been spending a lot of time with her".

Will seemed shocked at that and then smiled.

"I'm happy for you, El, but why were you ignoring my texts and calls for days?" he asked, looking hurt.

He knew she would never, ever, replace him.

"El, you can tell me anything at all, you know that", he said, "did anything at all happen at that party? Are you mad at me for dragging you there and then leaving you all alone? I'm so sorry!" he babbled, looking almost on the verge of tears.

The few students in the class were starting to stare at them.

She sort of panicked. Why was she such a terrible friend? Will had been worried about her, probably thinking the worst and here she was, avoiding him for such a stupid reason. She hated herself.

"Will no, I'm NOT mad at you… everything at the party was great", El said truthfully and Will seemed confused.

"It was the best night of my life, I will forever remember it as my

ultimate college experience, I am forever indebted to you for it", she continued, trying to make her best friend laugh at her weak-ass attempt at replicating Max's sarcastic humor.

Will's smile was more of a grimace.

"Are you sure about that?"

"You know I would tell you if something was wrong", El said, "Friends don't lie".

Everything seemed back to normal after that. They caught up with everything that had been going on those last few days. Will told El about his terrible hangover after the party and how "stupid Mike got us derailed for some reason and we finally got to the dorm at, like, 6 am" (El discreetly blushed at that, trying to hide a smile). El told Will about meeting Max and how, interestingly enough, she seemed to know Lucas (though she skipped the part in which she suspected about Max's secret crush).

"Oh, so SHE was the cute redhead he was talking to all night?" Will said, realization dawning in on him, "I remember her! Her name seemed so familiar… BECAUSE SHE'S IN OUR APPLIED PHYSICS CLASS!"

Will looked as happy as the day Joyce got him all the vintage X-Men figurines for his birthday.

This was such big gossip material.

"I can't believe it! And now you're her friend!? We gotta get those two together! We gotta hang out sometime, we have to-"

El was giggling at Will's enthusiasm, but they had to cut their conversation short because the professor arrived at that very moment.

At the second hour of the class, El was suddenly distracted by her phone vibrating in her bag. She carefully took it out and saw a text from Will.

5:14 pm Still not off the hook! u owe me an explanation about why u

were acting so weird.

El sighed, she had been hoping that Will would forget about that tiny detail. She typed a short answer, wondering what in the world she would tell her best friend.

5:14 pm OK.

5:15 pm After class

-….-…-…-

The class ended faster than El expected. She actually found the topic they were currently going over quite interesting, which pushed all other thoughts away from her mind. Including thoughts about how to evade Will's questions.

*I'll just go for the truth… if he asks, sure it's embarrassing but I cannot lie to my best friend.*

The thing that worried her the most though was Will's reaction to the news. Would he play matchmaker (like he was currently planning to do with Max and Lucas)? Would he tell her something she would not want to hear (like maybe that she was getting her hopes up for nothing)? Would he be mad and hurt because she had kept it all from him? Would he be weirded out?

Will and El were among the last students to leave the class.

"So… What's up? Please don't tell me that I did something while I was drunk and embarrassed you or something", Will said, looking horrified at the prospect.

Eleven had never seen Will drunk. At high school they had been the quiet losers that never went to parties, but she knew he had gone to a few ragers at college with his new friends. She wondered what kind of drunk her nice, quiet best friend was.

"No, I uh… actually don't remember seeing you after you left me dancing", she said.

"You're too much of a pro to keep up with", he joked.

"Hey! Max and I bonded over my amazing dance moves!"

He laughed at that.

"I like her already", Will added.

El knew she had to say something, tell her best friend everything.

She didn't know where to start.

"I was just worried about what you would think about me aft-", she began apologetically before Will interrupted her.

"El, I would never judge you for being a drunk dancer, you know that", he said sympathetically, completely missing the point.

"Plus, I've done things *way* more embarrassing than dancing", he continued.

Will went ahead and told her about something that happened at the party.

"…and the last thing I remember is being found by Mike and then dragging myself into the car", he told her, "and you were asleep on the copilot's seat".

El tried not to look too guilty.

"Yeah, I guess I was pretty tired after dancing my feet off", she said.

"Who knew you secretly take cardio dancing lessons", Will chuckled.

She punched his arm softly.

"So, how did you finally get to the car?" Will wondered.

"Well, I found Mike outside while trying to get some air and we just talked a bit", she said, hesitating to expand on her answer.

Will's curiosity, however, seemed placated without her having to elaborate on the great time she had.

El couldn't hide her relief at getting off the hook so easily.

It wasn't like she had actively lied to Will, or hid anything from him. She'd just gone along with the conversation… which happened to skip through the very embarrassing topic she wasn't yet willing to discuss with her best friend.

"Yeah, he said the same".

El was dying to ask if Mike had said something else about it, or about her.

They walked around campus in silence for a while. Both deep in thought.

"Is it OK if all of us hang on Saturday?" Will asked, taking out his phone.

"Uh… I guess, I know Max is free and we were going to hang out together anyway".

El was secretly hoping to see Mike again.

Which was childish and stupid. But, hey, Max had said her crush was okay and her opinion counted. Didn't it? She was supposed to know much more about life and guys and relationships than she did.

"Cool, tell her we're having lunch together"

-….-…-…-

***Saturday 9th, December 2017***

Lucas' facial expression was priceless.

Will, Mike and Dustin shared a knowing look when they saw El and Max coming out of their dorm building. The four guys were sitting on a bench not too far from it.

Ever since Will had told them about their Saturday plans, they'd tried for about two days to stop themselves from bullying Lucas too much about his evident and quite cute crush on Max. However, they all knew this outing was mostly for his benefit (and because Will wanted to prove his matchmaking skills) and their resolve finally broke that

morning, resulting in at least two hours of merciless teasing.

Which had resulted in reducing the usually grounded and confident Lucas into a blabbering, nervous mess.

*He must really like her*, Mike thought with a smile.

"Just try not to make your 'Lucas aka Chocolate Daddy' impression until, at least, the fifth date and you'll probably do fine", Mike teased loudly, trying to emulate his friend's ridiculous voice (and failing miserably).

Dustin broke out in a laughing fit and Will smiled widely at the comment. Truth was, Mike had been feeling nervous himself about going out with the two girls and had tried to hide his anxiousness by being especially annoying to Lucas.

The girls finally reached them. They all greeted each other a little awkwardly and tried discussing what to get for lunch. Mike, however, was otherwise preoccupied (definitely not watching a certain brunette girl) and couldn't help noticing that El blushed whenever their eyes met. It was cute.

His reaction to her was probably the same one, he realized bashfully.

From his conversations with Will so far, he had gathered that, like himself, she had also dodged Will's questions and had not been completely honest about what happened last Saturday. He wondered why the both of them were so reluctant to admit to their friends what had happened the night of the party. It wasn't as if something huge or terribly life changing had happened. Right?

He needed to talk to her about it, but was worried about making everything an even bigger deal. When it wasn't. It clearly wasn't.

After a while, everyone finally agreed to go to Taco Bell.

"Mike, didn't you offer to drive?" Dustin asked innocently.

He hadn't offered, but knew this was probably planned. This, especially considering that the only ones in their group with a car of their own were Lucas and himself. And there was no way in hell the

guys were letting Lucas drive when they could force him to interact with his crush instead. Right in front of their prying eyes.

"I did, didn't I?" Mike answered thoughtfully, "and we all know how serious I am about keeping my promises."

Lucas threw a murderous look in his direction, knowing all too well what his friends were up to. Mike pretended not to notice.

Will and Dustin made sure that Lucas sat right next to Max in the back seat of the car, sandwiched between them and their giddy glances. Since there was almost no room, Max was almost sitting on Lucas' lap, which made the whole situation even more awkward and all the more entertaining for Will and Dustin.

By that moment, Lucas was a permanent stuttering wreck and Max's cheeks had gradually blushed to the point her face was now almost the same shade of red her hair was.

Needless to say, the guys' antics were pretty evident by then.

"Next time we all go out, I'm driving too," Lucas said grumpily.

El nervously got into the front seat, trying not to think about just how different this situation was from the one last week. She sat and looked at Mike, who was starting the car. She smiled as an unruly strand of wavy black hair fell onto his face, and suddenly found herself avoiding the sudden impulse to bush it away from his eyes.

Since they were effectively cut out from whatever was happening at the back seat, Mike and El began a casual chat, telling each other about their classes and majors. It turned out that El was a psychology major and Mike a physics major, which probably should mean their interests were very different. However, on that short ride they found out they had quite a few common interests besides their weird love for breakfast – like their preference for indie music, the fact that both of them were night owls, their mutual fondness for film-watching, and an (unhealthy) obsession with all things Harry Potter related.

It was no surprise to either of them to realize that they liked each other's company the more time they spent together.

-….-…-…-

Lunch had been memorable.

The guys finally got to meet boisterous Max and immediately liked her loud personality and sarcastic humor. The atmosphere had relaxed a lot by that point and even quiet El felt comfortable enough to actively intervene in the conversation – which was currently focusing on a passionate discussion about whether the Harry Potter movies were good enough and lived up to the books.

"Of course the movies can't even be compared to the books but they are still good!" Will exclaimed in frustration.

"I mean, as much as I love Emma Watson, I will never get over the frustration of the 'HARRY DID YOU PUT YOUR NAME IN THE GOBLET OF FIRE' scene," Dustin interjected stubbornly.

"THANK YOU FOR THAT, THOSE ARE MY THOUGHTS EXACTLY," El said loudly, suppressing the impulse to hug the stocky guy.

"That was SO out of character," Lucas agreed.

"Oh, just shut up about this already. Everyone knows the problem with Harry Potter was totally the cast", Max chimed in, "I never read the books, but it was obvious that those actors were getting too old for their roles anyway."

The guys and El all turned to her with matching outraged expressions.

"I swear I didn't know about this side of her when I befriended her," Eleven said.

"What? It's only the truth," Max said shrugging.

"I need to forget you just said that", Lucas said horrified, looking at Max as if she had just grown another head.

"Guys, what about going to the movies?" asked Will, desperately trying to salvage the situation.

They agreed and ended up getting tickets for an afternoon show.

Halfway through the comedy movie they had ended up watching, Mike (who had totally NOT been watching El from the corner of his eye) saw Eleven get up from her seat and leave. His heart almost jumped from his chest. This was it. The opportunity he had been looking for all afternoon.

"I'm gonna get more popcorn," Mike said distractedly to Dustin, who was sitting next to him, as he got up.

His friend only managed a dismissive movement with his hand before exploding with laughter over something that had happened on the screen.

Mike almost tripped in his eagerness to get out of the place. He stood at the door of the room, waiting for El. He hoped he didn't come off as a stalker.

Finally, she appeared at the end of the hall, just getting out of the bathroom. Almost as if she could sense his gaze, she lifted her head. She seemed surprised to see him.

"Mike? What are you doing here?"

**A/N: I hope your enjoyed this chapter! And please don't worry about updates in this story guys! I already have the outline and overall plot figured out. Anyway, tell me what you think so far! I love reading your comments!**

# 4. Only for you

**A/N: Anyway, this is the longest chapter I've writen so far and I'm INCREDIBLY nervous about posting it... this truly was a hard one to write. Oh, also, for those of you who might want to listen to the song that gave the name to and inspired this chapter (I strongly recommend it), it's "Only for you" by Heartless Bastards. Sorry beforehand for all the angst.**

Chapter 4: Only for you

***Still Saturday 9th, December 2017***

"I uh, wanted to talk to you without our friends being there prodding, you know how annoying we can all be, you saw what we did to Lucas and Max in the car… But, don't worry, it's not like I want to talk to you about something uncomfortable, you know, I'm probably overreacting as always… it's just that, um, I-" he rambled uncontrollably.

*Keep it together Wheeler*, he thought, very frustrated with himself.

"Do you want to go outside?" asked El, saving him from further embarrassment.

Mike smiled in relief.

"Um, yeah, that would probably be better."

Making light, random small talk, they stepped outside the movie theater and El sat down on a nearby bench. Mike joined her, careful to leave a space between them and purposefully avoiding her questioning look.

"So… about last week?" he asked hesitatingly, "Well I… I told no one about it."

"I thought that maybe it would make you uncomfortable or something and that is the very last think I want," Mike said with a careful tone.

Even though she'd known Mike would probably want to talk about last Saturday, Eleven was truly surprised the conversation had gone in that particular direction. She'd been expecting him to say that it'd meant nothing and that it would probably be best to keep it a secret between them (actually, she had been rather dreading it).

*He is so thoughtful*, El thought in amazement.

Too afraid to she'd act like an idiot and say or do anything that might give away how she really felt, El waited for him to continue.

"It was great," he said turning to look at her in the eye.

"I really like spending time with you," Mike continued, his freckles standing out against his blushing cheeks, "maybe we could hang out more?"

Just the two of us.

He didn't say it, but there was no need to. It was hanging in the air between them.

The fluttering in El's stomach increased exponentially as she blushed too. She couldn't believe this turn of events. Surely, it was too good to be true.

*Max was right!?*

She waited for him to say something else, meeting his expecting gaze.

*Oh, he's waiting for me to answer*, it suddenly dawned on her. She cursed her awkwardness, hoping she hadn't looked like a clueless idiot.

"Um, I feel the same way," she said quietly, twisting her hands nervously.

She could feel a broad smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"You're the nicest guy I've ever met," she told him, quoting herself directly from what she'd said to him last week.

She had thought back a lot on those parting words and the one thing she regretted was maybe not making it clear enough. She'd wanted him to feel the honesty behind her words, which were not just some random thing she said while drunk.

El didn't need to glance up at him to know he was giving her that toothy grin she found so endearing.

"Maybe it's time to get back there?" Mike finally said, "They'll probably wonder why we're taking so long."

Too focused on the movie (that was apparently hilarious as hell) none of their friends seemed to think it was weird that Mike and El returned together, with matching pink blushes and looking equally giddy (and a bit guilty, too).

And with no popcorn.

***Tuesday 12th, December 2017***

"What in the world has gotten into you?" Max asked looking at her weirdly.

"Why are you smiling so much all the time?"

El, who had been smiling like an idiot because of some hilarious college-related meme Mike had just sent her, tried to school her features back into her usual poker face.

Actually, they'd been texting each other almost nonstop over the last couple of days, talking about the most random things, occasionally sending funny voice clips, and sharing an awful amount of memes and random pictures and weirdass links. But El was still not ready to talk about this new development, having come up with more than a million excuses to avoid mentioning Mike altogether. Mostly, she had decided that it wasn't worth commenting it to Max like it was a huge deal or something.

Because it wasn't a big deal. In fact, texting like this was something friends did.

And it meant nothing at all. Just that Mike and her were friends.

…Friends who had confessed to each other they liked each other's company. Nevertheless, it still meant nothing!

But, oh, how Eleven wished that that knowledge would be enough to put out that tiny hopeful spark for good. And kill off the stupid butterflies.

Hope was no good. She should know better by now!

Once again, she tried focusing on the contents of the bulky book on the floor, attempting (unsuccessfully) to remember the topic Max and she had been going over before she'd been interrupted by Mike's message. El casually sucked on the end of her pink highlighter thoughtfully, trying to ignore her burning cheeks and the fact that her friend was still staring at her, waiting for an answer.

"Oh, it was really nothing," she finally answered, trying to hide her guilty blush from her friend, "just a meme."

Eleven opened the hilarious image so it filled up her phone screen and showed it to her skeptic friend.

Max gave her a you-can't-fool-me look and then shrugged.

"Stop thinking everything I do is part of some conspiracy to get you and Lucas together!" said El, as she threw one of her pillows at Max, who was comfortably laying on the floor of her dorm room.

"You KNOW that's NOT what I was talking about!" exclaimed Max in outrage, while her face started heating up as well.

El pretended not to notice a thing by glancing at the text book again.

"Aha! Found it," El said, looking down at the book between them, "shall we continue? We were in the part about the separation of powers, remember the three branches? It's ok if we don't though, since we still have to write the flashcards for that particular top-"

"Fine, don't tell me now," Max said rolling her eyes, dispassionately interrupting her friend's academic-related babble, "I know you'll spill eventually."

After that one momentary interruption, they concentrated in the course material for a couple of hours until Max started getting really cranky (like she always did after talking or reading about their Government and Politics class for an extended period of time) and Eleven's stomach rumbled from hunger. At that moment, the decided to go out to the cafeteria to grab something to eat and finally relax somewhat.

"They better not make me try to memorize all that crap, I'm getting a headache as it is. Ugh." Max whined helplessly.

"Don't worry, the semester is almost over and we'll do alright," El said, trying to cheer up her friend.

"I *curse* the day I decided that having that course on my resume would make me appear as a more interesting, worldly person."

Eleven gave Max a sympathetic look.

"So… are you going to hang out with Lucas on Friday?" El randomly asked her friend as they waited in line to pay for their meals, in the hopes of getting Max's mind off that class for the time being.

Plus, it was sort of fun to push Max's buttons.

The redhead turned around so fast her long red hair whipped into her brunette friend's face. Eleven gave the redhead girl her most innocent expression.

However, Max's smile faltered as she seemed to think about the question seriously for a second.

"You know what?" she said unexpectedly, "I might."

"What?!" exclaimed El, unintentionally drawing some of the bored students' eyes to them.

"All I'm saying is that Lucas may not be a douchebag like all the other idiots I've dated and if the chance comes up… I might say yes."

El's mouth dropped open.

"You two are actually gonna date? Does anyone else know about this? What?! How?! WHEN?" she asked not even taking a breath.

"I said I MIGHT," Max clarified.

"He hasn't asked me out yet, plus he might not even like me," the redhead shrugged nonchalantly.

Now it was El's turn to give her friend an unconvinced look.

"Yeah, sure, Maxie."

El decided to let the topic go for a while and considered her friend's answer. She was really happy Max was finally opening up a bit about her thoughts on Lucas, she kind of really admired her friend for that. Eleven really wished she could be as straightforward when thinking and talking about Mike.

*I'll tell Max about everything when I'm sure there's something actually going on*, El thought to herself.

The girls sat with three of Max's friends for lunch. The four of them had actually met on their first month in college, when the redhead girl saw the three guys playing soccer on one of the many college fields and asked to join the game. Even though she was a newbie at the game, it turned out Max was insanely good with the ball because she was really fast and had amazing coordination. Needless to say, she totally kicked the guys' unsuspecting asses. Afterwards, quite surprisingly to Max, they'd been really good sports about it: instead of acting like jerks for being humiliated by a girl, they had excitedly invited her to come play with them again next week and even asked her to show them some moves.

However, despite Max's fondness for the three guys, Eleven was still not comfortable enough around them to drop her reserved attitude and still felt pretty much awkward all the time whenever Max made them all hang out together, which happened mostly at lunch. Although, El did have to admit the three of them were quite nice: despite being the sporty type (and being subjected to El's totally biased early prejudice because of it), they had turned out to be pretty decent, funny guys.

After their nice, uneventful lunch, Max left to go play soccer with her friends for the afternoon, while El placed her headphones on and headed to her afternoon classes. She had decided to be risky today and chose to play one of Spotify's personalized playlists. El smiled as soon as the first few notes of the song began, feeling lucky.

*Been a while since I felt this way about someone*

*And I'd really really like to know you more*

*Oh oh, know you, more*

*Oh, your eyes, they sing a song to me*

*I'd really really like to go to it, oh, go, oh*

*And I will oh, open my heart*

*And I will oh, only for you*

Humming to herself to the unknown song, she lazily made her way across campus, thinking about how Tuesdays were actually the heaviest days of the week for her, time-wise. Sure, her mornings were pretty much free, but she had her afternoons packed with classes… right until nighttime.

Just as she was taking a seat and getting mentally prepared for her first lecture and the other two lectures to come, her phone vibrated in her bag.

It was a message form Mike.

3:01 pm Wanna hang out tonight?

Her heart sped up its beating frantically and she almost dropped her phone.

Biting her lip anxiously, she started typing an answer with shaky fingers.

3:01 pm I'd like to! But I'm stuck here in D building until 9:30

A few moments later, her phone vibrated in the table again, startling her (even though she had been staring expectantly at the screen the whole time watching as Mike typed an answer).

3:03 pm Maybe we could hang a bit after your class?

She immediately replied.

3:03 pm That'd be great!

El knew she was smiling like an idiot, but she didn't care.

3:04 pm I'll come pick you up then :)

Her usually heavy schedule seemed even longer than usual.

Eleven was jolting down furiously in her notebook, trying to get all her notes down so she wouldn't take long to leave.

The fact that she felt her stomach twisting with nerves wasn't really helping. El was especially worried that the easy, comfortable banter they had going on in their texts wouldn't be the same in person. Her stomach churned at the possibility of her shyness making their conversation turn out to be one of the many awkward situations she was all too used to. However, despite her insecurities, she had a feeling that things wouldn't be that way with Mike. But she could be wrong like she so often was.

Finally, the professor gave the last instructions of the day, telling them about an essay that had to be turned in next class, and the class was officially over. With a shuddering sigh, El tossed her stuff into her bag as quickly as possible and all but ran out of the classroom. As soon as she got near the main entrance of the D building, she nervously stopped and, thinking better about it, got in the bathroom to her left.

She stared at her reflection on the huge mirrors covering the right wall of the bathroom. The girl in the reflection was almost breathless and quite flushed from hurrying so much and her wavy hair was somewhat disheveled. El tried fixing her unruly brown curls, despite already knowing her messy hair was pretty much a lost cause. Wide, brown, bewildered eyes stared back at her. The tingling feeling in her

stomach was getting worse by the second and she felt incredibly nervous.

*Calm down*, she thought urgently, taking deep breaths.

Her rapid breathing finally evened out and she got out of the bathroom.

It turned out to be a good thing that she decided to compose herself at the last minute, since Mike was already waiting for her near the entrance of D building.

The lanky guy was leaning against the wide rail of the stairs, absentmindedly scrolling through his phone. El's heart rate picked up a bit when she saw his tall frame.

*It's probably the fear of facing an awkward conversation, that's all… But it won't happen, this is just Mike and we're friends*, she thought to herself soothingly.

"Mike?"

"Hey El!" Mike smiled the minute he saw her.

"You've gotta see this video Dustin just sent me, it's hilarious," he said, handing his phone over to her.

It turned out to be a bad lip-read video someone made of the trailer of this upcoming superhero movie everyone was hyped about. She smiled as soon as she saw the pun in the video title, she loved those kinds of video parodies.

"I'm definitely watching this movie now," she said snorting with laughter and giving Mike his phone back.

"So how was class today?" he asked as they began walking away from the building.

El soon found herself excitedly sharing some of the most interesting things from her classes, specially gushing about her Developmental Psych class (her absolute favorite). Mike watched with a soft, surprised smile as quiet El rambled on as if enough words couldn't

come out of her mouth. He realized this was probably the most they'd talked since that memorable Saturday night. As he took in all of her excitement and interest in the topics she was describing, the tall boy couldn't help the pride that filled him when he figured how at ease she seemed to be around him.

After the hour it took them to reach her dorm building (they'd taken the long, really long, way home) they awkwardly stood at the entrance, trying not to look at each other. They'd barely even felt the time go by and neither of them wanted to cut the conversation short. At last, Eleven managed a weak "goodbye Mike" and left with an apologetic glance back. She'd told him she had classes early tomorrow morning.

Mike sheepishly waved at her when she said goodbye, trying to hide the nervousness he suddenly felt.

*Why am I feeling this way? She's just a friend*, the boy thought with a shake of his head.

He noticed his hand was still waving, even though she'd left a minute ago.

***Tuesday 19th, December 2017 (Nighttime)***

The middle-aged professor was enthusiastically going on about the superego, that part of the mind that acts like a person's moral compass and self-critical conscience. She eagerly explained how it's the part of the mind that internalizes everything that a person learns at an early age to be improper or punishable. Thus, it reflects social standards learnt from parents, teachers, and society at large.

El was hanging on to her every word. She found it absolutely fascinating. She loved learning things that took her a step closer to understanding herself better. For instance, she could now give a name to the ruthless, abusive voice in her head. Now, that was considerable progress towards her goal to beat it.

*I can't wait to tell Mike about this*, she though with a wave of tingly excitement.

Sometimes he picked her up and other times she waited at the library for him to finish his lessons in the faraway S building (where all the labs were). They had been hanging out for hours almost every night last week after their classes, talking about random nonsense and interesting class topics. And also telling each other about everything in their lives.

It had almost become a comfortable routine by now to walk around campus and then head back to the 24-hour café closest to her dorm for a cup of hot cocoa before parting.

Their nightly rendezvous had become El's favorite part of the day. She felt she could tell him anything without being judged or being subjected to his pity and she just *knew* he felt the same way about her.

El had even confided some of the childhood memories that still tormented her and even opened up enough to tell Mike about *him*, and what he'd done to her. She'd explained how Papa had adopted her to act as some sort of façade of his normalcy, for his colleagues' benefit and so he wouldn't lose his job. It was better than getting a wife (he'd repeated that so many times), because it was easier for him to secretly abuse a child physically and psychologically and terrify her enough to guarantee that she would never speak up. Eleven had been forced to endure his sadistic nature for years before she had finally left for college.

Her classes for the day were over before she knew it and she hurried to get out. Sure enough, Mike was sitting on a nearby bench, his long legs spread open lazily and a frown on his face as he glared at something on his phone.

A huge grin made its way across Eleven's face.

He stood up as soon as he saw her approaching, a matching grin plastered on his face, his previous bitterness disintegrating into nothingness. He had been having a shitty week, but seeing her always made his day better.

However, his frown stayed.

Mike was quiet that night.

Eleven soon noticed his uncharacteristic behavior and tried brushing it off for a while but, by the time they were heading to the café, El was concerned. Because, sure, some nights she monopolized the conversation and he was quiet because he was listening to her... But all those times she could always feel he was giving her his undivided attention because of his understanding comments and clever questions. Tonight, however, Mike seemed deep in thought and only half listening to her excited chatter. He had barely said a few words in the hour they'd been together.

Something was definitely off.

They had their usual order of hot cocoa and muffins and El tried asking him a few questions, in the hopes of getting him to tell her what was wrong. That trick had worked before, she knew Mike had a soft spot for sweet beverages and it always lifted his mood. She remembered that it was how she managed to make him smile the day he'd been down after a particularly nasty argument he had with his father over the phone.

After a few tries, and not wanting to push him further when he clearly didn't want to talk, El sighed and told him that maybe now was a good time to head home. Mike had nodded absentmindedly and walked with her in the direction of her dorm building. They were both quiet and deep in thought.

She turned to him to say goodbye and saw the glint in his eyes. El hated seeing the usually calm boy like this, she hugged him on an impulse. After a few short seconds, Mike hesitantly put his long arms around her, hugging back.

"Is something the matter?" she asked, neither of them were letting go of the hug.

Mike didn't answer and instead laid his cheek against the top of her head.

El sighed into his chest.

"Nothing worth worrying over," he finally said softly into her hair.

"I know something is wrong Mike, please, friends don't lie," she answered, the desperation she felt seeping into her voice.

She hated not being able to help him when she so obviously felt his distress. El felt the need to make him feel better and hugged his chest tighter. He softly moved his arms away from her and grabbed her shoulders, gently prying her away from him.

Her heart broke a bit at this. She stared up at him, feeling the corners of her eyes prickling with unshed tears.

*Poor, naïve, El, why do you have to be so damn sensitive? There isn't even anything to be hurt about.*

Oh, but there was. They were supposed to be friends and, so far, she had the impression they could share anything without feeling judged. Why couldn't he trust her enough to let her know what troubled him?

Refusing to be weak anymore, she bit her tongue hard and held his unreadable gaze defiantly, trying her best to ignore the sinking feeling she always felt whenever she had prolonged eye contact with someone. Mike's dark eyes reflected her determined face perfectly. She was silently challenging him to walk or look away.

It was unclear who started it.

They were having an unspoken stare-off one second and, the next, their lips were crushing against each other, frantically trying to sate a need that had been building in each of them since the first time they met. Without realizing it, their bodies leaned closer to each other. His long hands moved up of their own accord to cup her cheeks and her fingers caressed his soft wavy hair. His thumb stroked her soft cheek tenderly as his lips showed hers a dance she was quite new to.

After a moment, she stepped back, needing to get some air. He looked equally breathless and dazed.

*What just happened?*

El stared at Mike with wonder, her mind almost exploding once all

the hope she had been locking away broke out in a blinding swirl of possibility. The cold air was not helping at all to clear her jumbled thoughts.

However, the cold wind seemed to have a different effect on the tall boy. His hands immediately let go of her face, flinching as if her skin burned him somehow. Mike's overall expression changed radically.

"El I-I'm so sorry, I didn't meant to, thi-this was a mistake," Mike stuttered, roughly disheveling his already messy dark hair.

She blinked at him dumbly, trying to grasp the meaning of his words. Her brain was still overwhelmed from the kiss and it struggled to understand his harsh expressions.

"I'm so sorry, I'll leave now," he said before turning around and all but running away in the opposite direction (definitely not where his dorm building was).

El was left standing outside her dorm, her lips still feeling tender from the passionate kiss, and feeling utterly confused and very hurt at Mike's attitude.

She didn't know what else to do so she sat on the nearest bench and, with shaky fingers, fished her tangled headphones and phone out of her bag. Pressing play, she let out a long breath as the all too familiar tune flooded her ears.

*And I will oh, open my heart*

*And I will oh, only for you*

*And I just don't know what to do, my head has such a cloudy view,*

*I'm so tired, of trying, ooh ooh ooh*

*And I just don't know what to do, my head had such a cloudy view,*

*I'm so tired, of trying, ooh ooh ooh*

*All your lies are spinning round my head*

*And all, all this line of sorrow, ooh, yeah, ooh*

*All your lies are spinning round my head*

*And all, all this line of sorrow, ooh, yeah, ooh*

*Ad I will open my heart*

*And I will oh, only for you*

She'd been listening to that song on repeat for a week and, by now, knew the lyrics by heart. However, this time when she mouthed them, they left a bitter taste behind like they never had before.

El hadn't even noticed the warm tears trickling down her face, until she could taste the saltiness mixing with the bitter taste already in her mouth.

***Friday 22nd, December 2017***

To say that Mike was avoiding her like the plague was the understatement of the year.

It had been almost 12 hours since she'd swallowed her pride and texted Mike. She truly missed him, everything about him. The loneliness she felt walking home from classes had nothing to do with the gloomy weather, and she was all too aware of it.

Therefore, after another sleepless night, she'd decided to text him sometime around dawn. El figured that if she made it clear to him that whatever had happened meant nothing to her too, then maybe things could go back to the way they were.

She'd been clearly wrong.

El was currently having a late lunch with Max and Will, trying to be cheerful about the impromptu plans the three of them were coming up with before they all left for the short holiday break.

So far, her carefree façade was failing miserably, since Max had already pointed out twice today that she looked tired as hell (luckily, El could blame it on the exams and essays all of them were drowning

in that week) and Will had looked unconvinced when Eleven said for the fifth time that everything was alright with her (unluckily, her best friend knew her too well and couldn't be fooled by El's nonchalant attitude).

"So I'll tell Lucas and Dustin about it," Will said, already typing furiously on his phone.

"I'll invite my soccer buds," Max said cheerfully, "you guys will totally get along."

"What about Mike?" El asked impulsively, unable to stop herself on time.

Will looked up from his phone with a troubled look.

"I don't know what's up with him", he finally said, "Dustin, who's his roommate, says he barely sees him anymore".

El stared at her friend's frown, feeling her own brow furrowing deeper in concern. Could it be that the reason behind Mike's disconcerting attitude was her… and the kiss?

Had it truly affected him and much?

And… why?

"He wakes up and leaves before Dustin does and returns really late at night… and he's not really talking to anyone as much in class", Will elaborated, unknowingly interrupting Eleven's concerned thoughts.

"I mean, he's nice like always but he is quieter than usual", he finished, with a deflated voice and a slight slump to his shoulders.

She felt as if something heavy dropped on the pit of her stomach, a bad feeling in her gut. Something was terribly wrong.

"What do you think is going on?" she asked shakily.

"Maybe something at home?" Will answered, "We think that's it".

"Oh… how come?" piped up Max, who had been watching El's facial

expressions with a hawk-eye.

The redhead was truly concerned about her friend, even though she pretended to buy all her I'm-tired-because-of-finals bullshit. She definitely knew something was up with El and was determined to figure it out and maybe throw a punch or two at whoever dared distress her sweet, quiet friend.

"Because Dustin heard him talking on the phone the other night when he got to their room. He said Mike was having an argument, a pretty rough one".

El exhaled heavily, the heavy weight on her gut becoming more bearable.

*So it doesn't have anything at all to do with me.*

"Does he have a bad relationship with his family?" Max asked again, her interest piqued up despite her barely knowing Mike.

El looked at Will expectantly, worrying her lip between her teeth and feeling really sorry for the tall, kind guy she liked so much.

"No, don't think so", Will said.

Noticing the girls' curious expressions, he sighed.

"I think it has something to do with his girlfriend".

**A/N: I promise everything was absolutely necessary for the plot to be set in motion, nothing is gratuitous. Tell me what you thought about it?**

# 5. Don't delete the kisses

**A/N: I really hope you'll like this chapter, I've rewriten it over three times now tying to make sense of everything. There's not much action going on in it, but I felt it was necessary to focus on the feelings a bit.**

Chapter 5: Don't delete the kisses

***Still Friday 22nd, December 2017***

A sick feeling hit El really hard, her gut clenching painfully.

*You had this coming.*

Girlfriend?

*You idiot. Here it goes again, of course this was going to happen.*

It hurt.

*This is what always happens whenever you think you deserve anything other than loneliness.*

She swallowed back all the pain and tried to keep a straight face.

"Oh, so Mike has a girlfriend?" she managed to choke out with a controlled voice, trying inhumanly hard to keep herself together.

"Mhm", Will nodded absentmindedly, "they've apparently been going strong for several years now"

"Oooh, I never quite pinned him like the long-time girlfriend type," Max pointed out, her blue eyes wide from all the gratuitous gossip.

"Please DO tell us all the dirty secrets and nasty details and don't spare any details!" said Max excitedly looking at Will, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

At her friend's comment, images of Mike making out with some shadowy mystery girl suddenly filled Eleven's mind and she felt like

throwing up.

Thankfully, no one seemed to be noticing her utter mortification.

"Actually…I don't know much more about it since he doesn't really talk about her much", Will answered thoughtfully.

Max seemed to lose interest at that, and went back to text her friends.

El looked at her best friend anxiously, knowing he *had* to know at least something else. She was using all her might to try to hide the dread and expectation she felt at whatever extra shred of information her best friend had about Mike's relationship.

Masochistically, she desperately wanted. Not wanted. *Needed* to know more.

"I do know they have a long distance relationship now, since she stayed back in Illinois and he's, well, here" Will continued, still sounding very worried about his friend and oblivious to El's constipated face.

"Oh", was Eleven's witty reply.

Will frowned, looking at nothing in particular, as Max focused on something on her phone.

"And, yeah, we've been trying to respect his space until now, which is why I figured it was best not to tell him since he probably won't come anyway… but, now that we're talking about it, going out might just be what he needs…"

She tried swallowing the sudden knot on her throat, it was becoming increasingly harder to breathe. However, at the very moment El suspected she was about to have a panic attack or something, Max turned to be her lifesaver.

No longer finding Mike's love life interesting and loathing the sudden gloominess in the air, the redhead girl indifferently changed the topic to something more urgent. After all, the three of them *had* been planning to get trashed Saturday night with all their friends before they all left for Christmas and New Year's. Soon enough, Max and

Will began a discussion about where the party should take place, neither of them noticing or even suspicious of Eleven's prolonged silence.

Meanwhile, El tried to battle off her thoughts and keep the sharp, cruel voice that kept trying to push her off balance at bay. She refused to feel anything. She refused to be affected by something that never really meant anything, something that never actually was, that never actually happened or began or ended.

Most of all, she refused to cry. Especially in front of her unsuspecting friends. El knew she had this coming and still allowed herself to think that it might somehow be different. She refused to allow herself, once again, to be a victim to her own stupid hopes and illusions.

*You are pathetic.*

Yes, she was.

*You had this coming.*

Yes, she did.

***Saturday 23rd, December 2017 (Afternoon)***

Hours seemed to fly by without any consideration to El's gloomy state of mind. It had already been more than a day since she found out about Mike's relationship status and she still could not rid herself of the sick feeling at the pit of her stomach. She had aimlessly wandered from one classroom to the next, note-taking distractedly and getting through the day by letting herself be guided by the sheer routine of college life. Luckily, since these were the last few days before holiday break, everyone seemed as distracted as her and most of the professors had been quite light on them, work-wise.

El loved learning about the inner workings of the human mind and the reasons behind people's complexity. Her goal was to listen and help people that, like her, had had rough childhoods or came from difficult backgrounds. She knew just how deeply that could affect someone and El wanted to be there for others in the way Joyce Byers had been there for her: as a safe heaven, a comfort, and, overall, a

friend. However, things had been less than perfect lately, and for a lot of reasons.

Currently, Eleven was sitting on her bed, a voluminous textbook open on her lap and music from a random playlist playing softly on the background: she was the very picture of a responsible college student. But, who was she kidding? It had already been a few days since she had been able to actually focus solely in her college work… and that might have had to do with her dramatic, restlessly romantic, over imaginative mind (ugh). Lately, her gloominess and distracted mind had become yet another source of frustration for her, since it made everything so much harder for her.

Yeah, sure El's grades were a bit above average, but she had gotten used to and expected better results, especially considering she invested (or tried to invest) so much effort and time on her academics. Due to this, she could not shake the feeling of dread that hinted that maybe *she was the problem*. That no matter how much she strived, she would never be able to truly help. That she was just not good enough.

Evidently, this unshakeable feeling was a constant source of worry and frustration for Eleven, since she felt the responsibility to be the best she could be for the sake of the people she intended to help. Sometimes her own pushiness could be a huge weight on her shoulders, but she felt she owed to, at least, make as much of an effort as she could.

However, El knew and had to admit that it had also been a long time since she had truly felt any motivation at all to continue working towards her goals. And that had a lot to do with the fact that she felt everyone in her classes was just so much better than her, and she felt out of place and unable to keep up with them.

El felt sick, she looked sick, and it would not be a surprise at all if she had actually gotten sick. She had been wondering all day now if it would be rude to just skip the party she helped organize and disappear until the break was over. Plus, that could be a good distraction from obsessing over her final grades, something that she was already dreading. It would be incredibly easy to just pack up and buy a ticket to Hawkins. She knew Joyce wouldn't mind having her

for a couple of extra days and would probably understand.

*That would just probably make everyone here concerned, you idiot.*

But she was scared and tired.

Actually, truth was, Eleven did not feel nearly strong enough to keep up the cheery façade. Greatly due to that, she didn't know how much longer she could go on hiding just how shattered she felt inside: everything in her life, from her grades to her social life, seemed like a huge crumbling avalanche already coming down on her. Undoubtedly, having a lot of alcohol in her system was not the best idea in a moment when she felt so vulnerable she was almost bursting at the seams from all the emotion welled up inside her.

El's dread exponentially increased the closer it got to 9 pm, probably due to the fact that her love life (or lack thereof) was in imminent danger of exposure.

She didn't feel strong enough to face them, to stare at her friends' faces and look at them in the eye and *just continue to lie to them*. And pretend, just pretend she was having a great time and that everything in her life was going just great, when all she wanted to do was crawl into her bed and sleep for a day or two. Sleep until everything seemed so far away and dreamlike and blurry she wouldn't care anymore. Sleep until everyone forgot about her and until her existence faded away.

*You don't deserve them. Not a single one of them.*

There was nothing El knew better than that. Her friends were amazing people. They were the most loyal, kind-hearted and, overall, the greatest friends anyone could ever want or ask for, and the fact that she badly wanted to avoid them (maybe until next year) pained her… Maybe she should have come clean in the first place, at least with Will, who was supposed to be her best friend.

However, El could not imagine a more pathetic scenario than admitting to Will and Max her stupid, childish, and clearly one-sided feelings towards Mike.

She wanted to be alone and hide away forever. She felt so pathetic, so small, so undeserving.

*It's your own fault. How could you ever think someone would fall for **you***

It was becoming increasingly hard not to physically flinch at all the truth the cruel voice spat like knives at her. The salty tears made her vision blurry, and that's when she finally realized she had been crying all the while.

Why did a stupid disillusion over a crush wreck her so deeply?

Why was she so utterly scared of the inevitable? Why was she afraid of loneliness? Why did she feel like such a failure all the time, like she deserved nothing at all?

She would never admit it out loud, but one of high school El's most secret daydreams was having someone finally fall for her, or at least like her in a romantic way.

So stupid, she knew.

The quiet girl had always known that she was Plain Jane, she had heard it so many times from so many different people that it never truly hurt her anymore.

And that was fine.

Actually, it *had been* fine to be invisible. Because, at least for a while, it allowed her to survive high school. This, especially since people wouldn't talk to her and she wouldn't have to endure those awkward social interactions that made her so anxious. It had been fine, really, until she realized how sad it made her not to be like everyone else, how sad it was to feel so excluded from any chance at a potential romantic relationship.

It was stupid and it shouldn't have mattered as much as it did.

Sure, El knew that all relationships ended and that no relationship was ever perfect… but she'd always been a closet-romantic and she wanted what all the girls at school seemed to have or had had at that point. . She knew she had a shitload of problems to face back home,

but she'd always hoped her life could be different, which is maybe the reason this situation bothered her so much.

Most of her worry, she supposed, was due to the way she was always so hard on herself when she compared herself to others, always recriminating herself for things that (she knew deep down) escaped her control.

El felt ugly and boring and plain and too damaged.

"That is surely why no one notices me", she had concluded back in junior year.

So she pretended it didn't affect her.

She had tried her best to embrace it (like she'd embraced most of the other things that pained her)… but there were times in which that insecure and cheesy side of her would peek up into the surface again and demand attention, which is why El found herself harboring petty crushes throughout her high school years.

…And also, rarely, found herself dangerously close to feeling something else.

It had happened twice. Once at the end of junior year. Once during her last summer at Hawkins, before she headed to college.

Both of those times had ended disastrously.

They'd both ended with El feeling overwhelmingly disappointed and depressed and stupid for feeling that way in the first place. Stupid for blindly trusting someone that had no reason to care about her or her feelings.

*And here you were thinking maybe college would be different.*

*HA. HA. HA.*

All she had to do, El realized, was move on like she had done those other times. Eventually, she figured, she would probably forget about everything and then everything would be back to normal again.

She needed to keep herself busy and distracted. She had to go out tonight and try to have fun.

Max passed a beer bottle to a distracted Eleven, who couldn't help but scrunch her small nose at the memory of the bitter taste of the liquor.

"It's just a Corona, El, it's not that bitter", the redhead said condescendingly.

"Better start drinking now and be wasted when they all get here," some girl said, while clumsily taking a seat on a nearby chair.

El took a cautious sip of the golden liquid and sank further into the couch, listening intently to all the chatter and laughter around her. She and Max had been the first to arrive. However, despite her usual worries and perpetual awkwardness – mainly due to the people she wasn't acquainted with and the fact that they were all hanging out on the apartment of one of Max's friends – El was glad she was here instead of overthinking in her lonely dorm room.

*I made the right choice tonight*, she thought.

The bell rang and Max went to welcome whoever it was. It turned out to be Will.

"Finally!" she said, giving Will a quick hug.

"Hey everyone," the thin boy said with a shy smile, immediately recognizing some of his classmates.

The few people in the living room turned to greet him and El grinned with relief.

"Hey, why are Dustin and Lucas not here yet?" Max asked as she made her way back to the couch she'd been lounging in.

"Probably forgot they were supposed to bring more booze on their way here and are now desperately trying to get it," Will snickered rolling his eyes.

Probably due to her best friend's calming presence or perhaps

because of the beer she was still sipping occasionally, El began to feel a lot less self-conscious and her overactive mind seemed to slow down a bit. After a while, she was even chiming in on some of the conversation going on around her. It actually felt great to have to focus on banal chatter after all the hardcore emotional stuff her mind had been absorbed in lately.

One of Max's soccer friends (was his name Tim?) suddenly started a casual conversation with her, which was nice since she felt a bit like an intruder when she spoke up in other peoples' conversations. Also, she already knew him from the lunches Max made them have together and it helped her feel a lot less worried about making a fool of herself. After the usual initial discomfort she felt, she soon relaxed a bit and even elaborated more on her answers. El was surprised to find out the guy was also majoring in psychology and couldn't help her giddiness when he started discussing some of his favorite class topics.

El turned to Max, intending to ask for another beer (Coronas were actually not that bad!) and saw her friend blushing a bit. She had been so caught up in the conversation that she'd missed the ring of the bell and, apparently, Lucas and Dustin's arrival. She looked up with a he grin, happy about them being here.

Her smile froze in her face.

Mike was there with them, looking very tired and miserable.

Despite her contradicting feelings and the hurt and betrayal she still felt, El couldn't help the feeling of shrinking in her chest when she took in the dark circles under his eyes and the defeated hunch of his shoulders.

She saw Will, who had opened the door, look at his friends with concern and ask something quietly. Lucas only managed a nervous smile and Dustin only smiled and patted Mike's back, effectively pushing him into the apartment.

That's when their eyes met.

Dark brown and honey brown.

And she swore the breath was knocked out of her.

El quickly looked away, already feeling the stupid blush crawling up her neck and into her cheeks. Of course she wouldn't be able to escape her feelings for a night. Of course she was naïve enough to still be affected by Mike. The guy she'd been chatting with was looking at her with a questioning glance. Great, she had sure looked like a moron, gazing at someone who was not interested in her.

For the next forty minutes, she tried to follow the conversation, forcing herself to listen intently at Tim's excited talk, which she might have actually have found interesting if her mind didn't insist on wandering off. However, her own thoughts were menacing to choke her and reduce her into a pathetic, crying mess.

"Tim? I'm sorry but I think Max needs me right now, I need to go find her now," El suddenly said cutting the startled boy midsentence and standing up.

She decided not to dwell on his slightly hurt expression, she had her own hurt to take care of.

Quickly making her way to the kitchen, Eleven was glad she didn't accidentally bump into Mike or something. Sure, El knew that they needed to talk, for sure. However, she felt irrationally scared of having to make small talk to him now, in public and surrounded by their friends, and pretend everything was fine. Taking long, calming breaths, she leaned on a counter and just observed the hall in front of her.

Unexpectedly, just over the loud music playing in the living room, El managed to catch the hushed voices of two of her friends.

"I'm telling you, it's tonight or never! This NEEDS to happen before we all leave for the holidays!" Dustin was exclaiming.

Someone shushed him.

"It might backfire, is all I'm saying," Will answered pensively, "both Lucas and Max are so… stubborn."

"Which is why WE need to help them sort it out," Dustin replied with

a duh-voice.

She tiptoed quietly into the closest bedroom, hoping to go unnoticed by the guys out in the hall.

Glancing at the emptiness inside the messy room, she didn't think twice before finally sliding down to the ground, with her back on the wall near the door.

As she trembled a bit, Eleven realized she had been wrong. She was not ready to cry, not yet. Just think, just escape. Just not ready to face anyone at all.

Suddenly, someone barged in from the hall, allowing the loud music from the living room in when the door was flung open.

It was him.

Of course it was him.

And he looked every bit as frantic and desperate as she felt inside.

He didn't notice her until he closed the door behind him quietly, probably also hoping to go unnoticed. Finally, when he did see her tiny shape on the ground, Mike ran a trembling hand through his already messy hair.

At the sight of her, his dark eyes turned gentle and his face filled with all the guilt he'd felt since last Tuesday.

"*I'm sorry*," he said, standing up next to her with his back to the closed door, "I should have known avoiding it would be worse."

El could not, for the life of her, manage to glance away from her shoes.

"I'm sorry, I just, I don't know, a lot's been going on lately and I, I really shouldn't have done that, I know that I've probably hurt your feelings and that's the last thing I would ever want and I did it and then I just couldn't face you-" Mike rambled frantically, like he was finally letting out all of the thoughts that were driving him sick with worry and guilt.

"Ok," was all El managed to say. She knew he hadn't intended to hurt her feelings. But everything was still wrong.

"No, El, it was not ok and *I'm so sorry*. I didn't mean for that to happen, you're my closest friend right now and I guess I needed someone to vent to, and I did, I did in the worst way and now I get it if you hate me forever, I really do-"

Still standing, he burrowed his face on his hands and Eleven, from her place sitting on the floor, could no longer make out any words.

"Mike? We can still be friends," she found herself saying even as the sinking feeling in her stomach grew.

Silence engulfed them in a blue atmosphere that matched the messiness and darkness of the small bedroom they were in, as well as their general mood.

"Are you ok?" she finally asked with a controlled voice, touching Mike's knee cautiously but still not daring to look up at him.

"No," he answered, not looking up.

She needed him to know that she knew.

"Is this about your girlfriend?"

At that, Mike looked up at her. Guilt was written all over his sharp features.

"I wanted to talk to you about Bex… I know it makes everything look even worse."

*Bex*. Now the mystery girl had a name. And it hurt so much more.

"It's ok, I know you never intended for anything to happen," El replied because she knew it was the right thing to say.

And it was the truth. Even if it was confirming all of the nasty thoughts the cruel voice had been bombarding her with those last few days.

"Will told me about it", she confessed in a low voice, trying to keep up an indifferent façade and break the uncomfortable, heavy silence.

"Yeah… I know they worry about me", he sighed, "and Dustin probably checked my texts or something".

"So what happened?"

"That's just… it's just very complicated", Mike answered, letting each word out hesitantly, "Bex's grandfather died and she's not coping very well…but then, she has been lashing out a lot lately, even before that happened. I'm worried about her."

She knew how much it hurt to lose someone you love, she'd been through that herself quite a few times. It was tragic, and El found herself reluctantly empathizing with the girl.

And she hated it.

It was better when she was an individual, unbiased third party (well, as unbiased as her crush on Mike could allow her to be). It was definitely better when she could mentally criticize Mike's relationship without feeling guilty, when she could hate on the mysterious, faceless and nameless girlfriend without any feeling of remorse over it.

"Maybe she was too scared he would pass away and angry she couldn't do anything about it… and she's taking her anger off on the people closest to her", El said slowly, suddenly recalling a similar conversation she had with Joyce a few years ago.

Mike looked at his hands, feeling hopeless and shook his head.

"I try to be understanding and I try to be there for her you know?" he said in frustration, "but I also need to give her some space, and it's hard because I tried but she keeps pushing me away and I *promised*".

His long legs bent and, unceremoniously, Mike slid down to the floor, hiding his face behind his long graceful fingers.

"I promised".

She noticed his shoulders shaking slightly and, despite her hurt and her better reason, her heart went out to him. He had been right with her through her weakest moments, through her moments of vulnerability and reliving the childhood ghosts that still haunted her. Despite realizing she was probably the less suited person to give comfort, Eleven couldn't find it in herself to put her feelings first at this time.

Hesitantly, El placed one of her arms around Mike's long-limbed frame and squeezed his shoulder awkwardly. She really had no idea how to do this. Will, her closest friend, had never really had a breakdown like this, always being one that kept to himself when feeling sad or depressed.

In what felt like a few minutes later, Mike and El were startled by a sudden loud noise coming from the bedroom next door. Despite their already awkward sort of embrace, they quickly sprang apart from each other, both equally scared of their friends catching them in such a vulnerable moment.

"For real guys?" Lucas yelled while pounding at the door, his voice sounding crystal clear due to the thin wall separating both rooms.

Only faint laughter could be heard from the hall.

"You'll pay for this, I SWEAR!" screamed Lucas again, this time with a defeated tone. This, maybe because he knew full well his friends were probably already in the living room and most likely out of earshot.

El heard Mike chuckling softly.

"They've gone through with it," he said.

"Were they really planning to force Lucas and Max to date by locking them in a room?" Eleven answered, thinking back at what she heard at the kitchen.

"Not date," Mike said, "just confess their undying love to each other."

Eleven snorted at that.

"Well, I know for a fact, Max would have totally agreed to go on a

date if he had asked."

"Lucas is a proud guy, he would probably take months to finally convince himself to put his pride at stake," Mike answered solemnly.

She couldn't help the small smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth. El was sure that Lucas' cautious nature would balance out Max's risk-taker attitude.

God, she shipped those two so hard.

Almost without thinking, El turned to look at Mike and saw a similar smile in his face. He did seem a lot better now, as if some weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

"Hey El, thanks for being here right now, and being my friend," he said on an impulse, his dark brown eyes boring into her.

El swallowed the sour knot stuck on her throat.

If that's all she could ever be, if that's what he needed right now… then she was happy she could be her friend.

But it still hurt. Her pride hurt. Her heart hurt.

She looked down, breaking the eye contact and trying to blink back any traitorous tears that could give away the tornado of emotions roaring inside her chest.

Thankfully, Mike didn't seem to notice the shift in her mood, as he was now clumsily trying to stand up.

"You ready to go back there yet?" Mike asked El, offering her a hand.

"Not really, I'll just take advantage of the fact no one has noticed my absence yet," Eleven answered sincerely, "I feel like I need some alone time right now."

**A/N: Thank you all for your amazing comments, they really make my insecure little heart soar.**

# 6. Last Christmas

**A/N: Here's chapter 6! Apologies beforehand for any and all mistakes, I was in such a hurry to update (because, honestly, those reviews you guys write literally make my day) that I didn't really proofread it.**

Chapter 6: Last Christmas

***Monday 25th, December 2017 (Nighttime)***

"Have another one dear!" exclaimed Joyce, looking at El with affection.

Eleven smiled shyly at the motherly woman as she grabbed another cookie from the plate she was being offered, wanting to humor Joyce even though Christmas dinner had her feeling full already.

She was currently sitting cozily between Will and Jonathan on the Byers' old brown couch. After fixing and having a small dinner just between the four of them, it seemed only natural to sit together and watch a funny Christmas movie. Which is how El now found herself nibbling on her gingerbread cookie while smiling at how much she could relate to the grumpy Grinch onscreen (except for the fact that she didn't loathe Christmas).

All of it felt so warm and familiar and homey and nice. And it had been like a balm for El's wounded feelings. Being a part of all that domesticity and feeling the overall care only a family could give truly felt like a relief after the emotional whirlwind she'd been experiencing lately. She closed her eyes suddenly feeling very drained, her eyelids dropping almost without her noticing.

El was so tired. Maybe because she couldn't sleep soundly since the party on Saturday. Maybe because Will and she hadn't had a moment to really rest after arriving from their trip yesterday afternoon.

Maybe because her overactive, over-worrying mind was finally allowing her to have a much needed breather.

Before the Grinch carried out his evil plan, Eleven was deeply asleep.

The movie ended and Will and Jonathan helped their mother clean up and left. A yawning Joyce walked over to the sleeping girl on the couch and gently awakened her.

"You know you're sleeping in Will's room for the time being sweetheart," Joyce told her with a tired but kind smile.

"Thank you Joyce, for everything," El answered and gave the older woman a hug.

They both knew what she meant. Not only thank you for having me over for the holidays, but thank you for giving me a home to come to.

Eleven would never forget it was school psychologist Joyce Byers who helped her get the full scholarship she so desperately needed to escape from *his* clutches for good. Joyce had also been the one to convince the Chief of Police, Jim Hopper (who also happened to be a close childhood friend), that something was very wrong with the way "respectable" Dr. Brenner treated his young adoptive daughter. She'd taken the matter into her own hands, not being able to bear seeing the young girl suffer so much in silence.

At the beginning of senior year, using one of El's videotapes of the abuse she experienced at home, Hopper was able to blackmail Brenner into giving Eleven enough money so she could live a comfortable life in college. Also, he forced him to promise he would leave the young girl alone forever effective immediately – once she tuned 18, Eleven would be free of Brenner for good also in paper.

Joyce, of course, had been the mastermind behind it all and she gladly took young Jane 'Eleven' Ives in for the remainder of senior year. El had only just learned the full details of how Hopper and Joyce managed to get her freedom back in August, before leaving for college. That way, in her heart, Joyce, Jonathan and Will had truly become her family.

-….-…-…-

She woke up with a start.

Her heart was beating furiously fast and she could feel the beads of sweat accumulating on her temples and neck.

El couldn't remember the dream and she didn't want to. She felt scared and jumpy and anxious, almost like she had all those years ago when she still lived with *him*. When she was under *his* control.

Eleven shivered and it had nothing to do with the chilly winter weather. It was almost as if she could feel Brenner's cold grey eyes glinting at her menacingly from the darkened woods she could see through the window.

*That's impossible, he doesn't even live here anymore.*

She got up from the bed, untangling her legs from the blue sheets and clumsily made her way through the house and into the darkened kitchen. El poured herself a glass of cold tap water, hoping it could help calm her nerves.

"Jane dear? El?" Joyce walked into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes.

"Is everything alright?" the older woman asked, her worried look settling on Eleven's agitated stance.

"I had a nightmare… I guess Hawkins is still haunted for me, even if *he*'s gone," El answered honestly.

Joyce looked at her with sympathy, her heart going out to the young woman. At times like these, it seemed as if little Jane Ives materialized in front of her, trembling and crying for hours on end on her tiny school office – not talking at all, but conveying so much hurt and distress that Joyce couldn't help but do everything in her power to help her out.

"Is that all though? I thought I saw you a bit distraught lately."

They'd only arrived yesterday evening and hadn't had much time to catch up, but Joyce's keen eye had not missed the sad glint in El's honey brown gaze and the worried look his son kept giving his best friend.

"El, honey, you know we can talk about anything without judging,

right?"

The young girl smiled and bit her lip. She was embarrassed, but Joyce was right. She knew the older woman would never judge her and, on the contrary, would put herself in her place and give her the best advice.

"It's about my disappointing academic performance… and this boy," El muttered quietly, looking downwards.

Eleven soon found herself unable to stop the flow of words pouring uncontrollably from her mouth, they were everything she had wanted to say and everything she wanted to keep for herself. And it felt just so good to let it all out, like a huge weight evaporating from the pit of her stomach.

Joyce listened attentively, not once interrupting the young girl. She knew it took a lot of trust and confidence for Eleven to finally allow herself to open up about her feelings, and even so, it was something she very rarely did, even with her. When El finally went silent, the kitchen was not as dark anymore.

"El, honey, first of all, you don't even know your final grades yet and the semester is not over, I am sure you will get everything you've been working for," Joyce said, knowing El had nothing to worry about.

After all, Jane Ives was one of the brightest, most perseverant and brave young women she'd ever met, "I know you'll do great."

Eleven managed a weak smile, feeling flattered at all the trust Joyce had in her abilities, at all the chances she'd given her. El desperately hoped she wouldn't let her down.

"Now, about the boy… well, you accepted being his friend and that is no doubt what he needs right now… but, the question is, will *you* be okay with only that?" Joyce asked gently, "Sometimes the truth we keep for ourselves damages us in a way it wouldn't if we shared it with the right person."

El mulled over the older woman's words, slightly shifting against the

counter she was leaning on. She had to admit that it had felt quite good to let it all out. Maybe the whole problem this semester was because she had not been opening up to Will and Max, her closest friends, about the things going on in her life. Maybe swallowing all her doubts and hurt and guilt did more damage than good.

But she had been so afraid they would judge her, so afraid that they would change their opinion about her and who she was once they knew what exactly had been burdening her lately. It was nothing she was proud about.

"Why don't you take a seat dear?" Joyce said smiling kindly from her place at the kitchen table, "I'll make us some tea, it always makes me feel a lot better."

-….-…-…-

***Monday 8th, January 2018 (Morning)***

El grumpily woke up to her annoying rooster alarm ringing.

*Why don't I have a marimba alarm like everyone else?*, was her first conscious thought, as she brushed a tangled strand of brown hair off her eyes.

Will and she had taken the afternoon bus home and had arrived at their dorms sometime at dawn, resulting in only a couple of hours of peaceful slumber. But Eleven could not complain. They'd chosen to spend every possible moment keeping Joyce some company, which is why they had postponed their trip back to college until the last possible moment. This, mainly because Jonathan had to leave immediately after New Year's (without any real explanation) and neither Will or El them could bear leaving the nice woman on her own.

After making quick work of her disheveled appearance, Eleven made her way to the cafeteria. She was excited to see Max again because, even though they'd been texting and video-calling each other quite regularly during the two weeks they were apart, El had still missed her boisterous friend during the holidays. Especially after her long talk with Joyce, when she felt guiltier than ever to be keeping things

from Will and Max.

As soon as she had her breakfast ready, El looked around searching for her friends.

"Ellie! Oh, I've missed the shit out of you," Max said dramatically as soon as she saw her, waving her over to a nearby table where she, Will and Lucas sat.

Trying to ignore the familiar sinking in her stomach, El gave her friends a shy smile and sat down. Without really intending to or noticing, Eleven zoned out, mainly going over the many long conversations she'd had with Joyce over the holidays.

She'd already talked to Will about the whole issue, apologizing profusely for not telling him earlier. Not surprisingly, her best friend had been very understanding of the whole issue. Despite agreeing that Mike probably didn't intend to mess with her feelings (he just wasn't that kind of person), he still empathized with Eleven. Especially because he knew how fast El crushed on people and how much she feared any sort of romantic hope.

Soon enough (at least in El's distracted perception), the guys left for their Graphics and 3D Modeling class – which she knew happened to be Will's favorite class of the semester, since it allowed him to design and draw. She was happy to see how comfortable and happy her best friend acted, she wished she could someday feel like that.

El was left with Max, who was absentmindedly eating her vanilla yogurt, seemingly lost in thought and not really talking as much as usual. The redhead had been mysteriously distracted throughout breakfast and El wondered if something had happened at home during the holidays. Both of them had free periods until after lunch and, since classes had just resumed, they could spare some time before heading to the library like they always did Monday mornings.

They decided to take a walk and catch up on what went on during the holidays.

" -and then, right I the middle of Christmas dinner, Billy made a huge deal about his father not acknowledging his achievements, which, by

the way, is really ironic since the only good thing he's done all year is barely managing to not get kicked out from community college," Max explained barely containing her frustration and angrily kicking some fallen leaves that were on their way.

Eleven quietly listened to her friend's angry rant about her violent stepbrother, knowing it was one of the few subjects that truly got to her. She knew how much Max worried for her mother's safety, all alone back in California, living with a couple of irascible men. And she could perceive how guilty Max felt for loving college so much and dreading going back home (but who could blame her, really?).

El often worried about how much of a toll that took on her otherwise happy and carefree friend.

-….-…-…-

Max and El were sitting on the library, on the same one they first met, quietly trying to get some work done ahead so that assignments wouldn't snowball on them later on. In between jolting down important details from the textbook on her flashcards, Eleven glanced at her redhead friend every once in a while, worrying about the deep frown on her friend's tanned face. She was at a loss of what to do to cheer her up.

Trying to distract herself from all the worried and guilty thoughts bombarding her, she nervously glanced at her unlocked phone screen, successfully managing to amuse herself by snooping on the lives of her old classmates and new acquaintances.

*Ping.*

Her heart sped up as soon as she saw the message notification pop up on the top of her phone screen. Mike had sent her an image (probably a meme) and she couldn't help the small smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

This was their friendship now.

Funnily enough, it reminded her a lot of those early weeks in which they'd decided to be tentative friends and hang out together behind

their friends' backs. However, unlike before, the relationship had a quiet but very palpable strain to it now – it showed on the fact that the topics they talked about never went too deep or emotional, on the fact that their conversations didn't extend over the dead of the night, on the fact that several hours passed before they answered each other's messages, on the fact that most of their answers were one word long.

Nevertheless, El suppressed a smile at the shirtless Kylo Ren meme, which she still found hilarious even if she hadn't watched the latest Star Wars movie. Promptly, she searched her photo gallery for a funny image to send him in return.

She heard a huff to her left and turned to watch a grumpy Max.

"You done? Let's get some lunch?" El said lifting a brow at her friend.

"Yes please, I'm starved," answered the redhead exhaling quite loudly, not needing to be asked twice.

As they made their way out of the library, she tried to come up with a way to take Max's mind off her home problems for a bit.

"Have you watched the Last Jedi?" El asked, trying to sound casual.

"Huh?" Max seemed very distracted.

"Star Wars Episode VIII?"

After a few seconds, realization finally dawned on Max's big blue eyes.

"Oh! No, haven't seen it… but I haven't watched any of the others either."

"I haven't either, just a couple of them but people say the last one is really good," Eleven said with a smile, "plus, I know how much you love action movies."

Max couldn't help a weak grin.

"You know me too well Ellie."

"Maybe we could go today?" she asked her redhead friend.

"Come on Maxie," El pleaded, "it's a miracle they still haven't taken it out from the cinema downtown."

"Yeah let's go, I mean, why the hell not?" Max said after a while, "I could use some fun before things get crazy around here."

The mood significantly lifted after that and El found her own attitude become incredibly cheerful too.

It was Monday, so they'd have an early lunch with Max's soccer buddies as usual.

El was expecting it to be awkward, considering the last time she'd talked to one of Max's friends she'd left him mid-sentence and walked away. And she felt terrible about it. In fact, her inner voice had been giving her hell for it the night it happened, resulting in her being amongst the last to leave the apartment (she'd made sure that Tim was no longer there so she wouldn't have to face him).

However, it turned out that her fear and anxiousness were pointless, since Tim and the others were cheery and nice as usual. Furthermore, Tim was the one to start a conversation with El – asking her about her Christmas – which she took as a sign that there were no hard feelings between them. Actually, the mood was so relaxed, it seemed only a few minutes before both she and Max had to leave for their Government and Politics class.

As they walked to class, El noticed that Max was almost back to being the talkative and hilarious person she'd grown to appreciate so much.

Tim was not mad at her. Lunch had turned out to be fine despite her worst fears. Max was almost back to being her normal self. Her friendship with Mike seemed to be going ok. And she'd managed to get some college work done despite her hyperactive mind.

Actually, things were going a lot better now in contrast to how they'd been a couple of weeks prior. Maybe, as Joyce said, all she'd needed was a breather and a little distance from her own mind to be able to appreciate her problems in their real dimension.

Her phone pinged in her hand. As soon as she glanced at the screen, El's heart did the small flutter she was already used to.

It was message notification from Mike.

She no longer suppressed the smile tugging at her lips.

-….-…-…-

***Monday 8th, January 2018 (Nighttime)***

The pavement was full of puddles from the melting snow.

*Last Christmas, I gave you my heart*
*But the very next day you gave it away*

El huddled herself in her heavy navy jacket, readjusting her headphones better underneath her heavy waterproof hood. Winter here was way colder than winter in Hawkins and she was having quite a hard time getting used to the bitter chill of the wind and the humid atmosphere. She'd just gotten out of her last class for the day and she was now on her way to the dorm building, where she and Max would meet to go to the cinema.

*This year, to save me from tears*
*I'll give it to someone special*

As she made her way carefully though the wet asphalt, Eleven caught a glimpse of a familiar store window. All at once unwanted memories rushed forward, clouding her mind with bittersweet images and sounds and smells.

*A crowded room, friends with tired eyes*
*I'm hiding from you, and your soul of ice*

Laughter. Hot cocoa and marshmallows. A wavy strand of dark hair.

*My god, I thought you were someone to rely on*
*Me? I guess I was a shoulder to cry on*

By the time she made it to the tall grey-colored building, she was blinking back tears and feeling every bit the emotional idiot she

knew she was. As she carefully approached, El could distinguish three darkened figures in the distance, apparently sitting on a bench near the main entrance of the dorm building.

"El! Finally!" Max called over to her, shivering a bit.

Lucas and Mike were with her.

Eleven's heart started beating twice as fast in what she was sure was her body's preparation to flee.

"Hey El," said Mike with a small smile.

Eleven tried to say something but, apparently, she'd become a mute in the lapse of a few minutes.

"Good you're finally here, our butts were almost frozen off," Lucas snickered as he smiled teasingly at the shy girl, not noticing her anxiousness.

However, Max did notice El's flabbergasted expression.

"I know this was supposed to be a girl movie night but Lucas offered to drive us there which is actually really convenient since there are no buses scheduled tonight and there is no way in hell we're walking to town in this weather."

"The only problem is that I had an issue with my car's battery on the drive back to college, apparently it froze… or something-" added Lucas, looking a bit sheepish for once.

" – I told you already that it's dead, extreme cold can pull the voltage off it and it's harder for the engine to start-" interjected Max, showing off her mechanical engineering knowledge and rolling her blue eyes in fake annoyance.

" – wait… Why did you offer to drive us if you have no functioning car?" asked Eleven trying to keep herself grounded and not give in to her murderous thoughts.

"Uh, that explains me… he asked me to take you all there," answered Mike before Lucas could muster something to say.

Of course, Mike had to be the only other guy out of the four friends to have a car.

**A/N: So, in this chapter, I really tried making things up for El because she deserves an emotional break after all the angst she's been through. Also, I really really loved writing her short scene with Joyce :) There will definitely be more Mileven and hopefully more Lumax next chapters (which are almost finished, by the way!).**

**Thanks to those of you who have steadily supported me with your reviews (you know who you are), you never fail to make me smile :)**

**RedRoyalty, unfortunately I have not planned any scenes between Mike and his sisters, since most of the story is focused on El's perspective of things (if not, it would ruin all the plot twists hahaha) but I agree that those soft scenes would be soo cute.**

**As always, tell me your thoughts on the story so far :) I LOVE reading what you have to say, it never fails to motivate me.**

# 7. While my guitar gently weeps

Chapter 7: While my guitar gently weeps

***Still Monday 9th, January 2018 (Nighttime - Late)***

The ride over to the tiny college town seemed endless as Lucas excitedly gave the girls, mostly for Max's benefit, an astounding amount of details and context to "properly prepare" (as he said) for the movie they were going to watch.

Lucas' good intentions, at the end, however, turned out to be pointless since both guys ultimately tagged along for the movie as well. That is how all of them ended up buying online tickets for the last show – regardless of the fact that both Lucas and Mike, being the huge nerds they were, had already watched The Last Jedi more than once.

Eleven could not be grumpier about the whole predicament. She wasn't even trying to hide the fact that it annoyed the crap out of her that her plan to make Max feel better by watching a movie together had unexpectedly turned into some sort of bad parody of a double date. To make things worse, after the initial awkwardness in the air after Eleven's arrival (probably due to her blatant annoyance), Lucas and Max seemed to get comfortable and content around each other really fast.

*Traitor.*

The fact that they were sitting in the back seat seemed to really help them get even cozier together.

*I wonder what really happened on that party.*

El was realizing at that very moment that Max had so far successfully avoided talking too much about what happened during the forty minutes she and Lucas had been locked in a room together. Whenever Eleven asked, Max would say that they had "just had a friendly talk". Somehow, El knew there was something more to it.

She made a mental note to pester the sneaky redhead for details about it later.

Of course, Lucas and Max's attitude meant that Mike and El were left out of their conversation and spent most of the beginning of ride awkwardly trying to make small talk and avoiding eye contact.

"So, uh, Will told me Christmas was good," Mike said.

"Yep, we watched How the Grinch stole Christmas and got hot chocolate wasted," she replied immediately, thankful for him finally cutting the awkward silence.

Without meaning to, she found herself smiling as she recounted Jonathan's weirdass comments and trivia throughout the movie – he knew a LOT about filmography, which could be expected since it had to do with his photography and film majors – and Will's hilarious observations – being artistically inclined as he was, it was only natural that the small boy had a keen eye for the most random details.

Mike couldn't hide a soft smile upon hearing the endearing way in which Eleven talked about the Byers family. Actually, listening to her made him miss his parents and sisters a whole lot more.

" –and did you know that actors had like this Who School in which they were taught how to act like Whos and feel comfortable with their characters," Eleven said barely stifling a giggle at the memory of that particularly hilarious scene.

"I can't actually picture myself being a good citizen of Whoville… they are all so happy and cheerful all the time," she added in mock horror, no longer able to contain a fit of giggles, "they'd probably vanish me too."

He couldn't help a loud laugh at her self-deprecating humor.

Soon after, Mike carefully parked his car at the mostly empty lot.

They'd already bought the tickets online and had about fifty minutes to kill before the movie started.

"So, we stay here where it's warm, or what?" asked Mike, secretly disappointed that his conversation with El had to be cut short.

It had been the longest conversation they'd had in weeks and he had to admit he'd missed her so much. Actually, thinking about her and the great time they always had together had been a common occurrence over the holidays.

"Well, I don't know about you guys but I'm starving-" Lucas complained, successfully interrupting Mike's nostalgic line of thought.

The serious guy was glancing longingly over at the flashing 24-hour restaurant sign on the other side of the street.

" – did someone say food?" interrupted Max, violently turning her head around to where Lucas had spotted the tiny diner.

And that was that.

-….-…-…-

*If you leave me now, you'll take away the biggest part of me*
*Uh no baby please don't go*

*And if you leave me now, you'll take away the very heart of me*
*Uh no baby please don't go*

The old 70's song filled the whole place, making the overall atmosphere of the diner seem even more vintage.

"I see you are a fan of Chicago," Mike blurted out randomly, noticing the way El was distractedly mouthing the lyrics of the song.

Living for a year with Joyce Byers, El had really come to enjoy the good old classics. That particular song was one of her favorite jams since, for some reason, it reminded her of rainy nights and warm tea.

Eleven smiled at Mike warmly, getting too caught up in his charm and almost forgetting for a second that she should be guarding her feelings.

Max, who had been a casual witness of the entire exchange, gave

them a funny look and raised an eyebrow at her brunette friend. Almost immediately, the smile on Eleven's face fell as she fought to control the furious blush that was already creeping up her neck.

She should know better than to feel all warm and happy because of the tiny details Mike noticed about her, because of how interested he always seemed in what she said, because of his clever questions and remarks.

*It means nothing,* she already knew that.

She should know better.

But her mind and the stupid tingling in her stomach were not agreeing with her at all. And that made it hurt so much more, because she had to constantly remind herself that all of it was nothing and it meant nothing and that *Mike just didn't like her that way*.

The four of them sat comfortably in one of the red booths and ordered some food. Lucas, Mike and Max seemed comfortable enough, nevertheless, El had reverted back into her quiet self. Once again, she was viciously chastising herself.

How could she have ever been so naïve as to think that it would stop hurting even for a second? Joyce had been right all along, she couldn't do it.

She couldn't be Mike's friend and to even try was delusional.

Sure, she could pretend for now. However, truth was, Eleven was just so sick of pretending and having to bury all of her feelings away all the time. And just trample them as if they were nothing, as if she was nothing. As if how she felt and what she thought were things to be ashamed of… when maybe they truly weren't.

*Let's face it, you tend to over-exaggerate. There you were during holidays, worried as hell and dreading Will's reaction and then everything turned out of be okay.*

Oblivious to the emotional drama her friend was going through at the moment, Max began telling them some amusing, crazy anecdote

involving a soccer game, wet grass, and a giant puddle. Eleven glanced at her funny friend, also taking in the smiling faces of the two boys they were with.

Her already heavy heart sank further.

-….-…-…-

***Tuesday 16th, January 2018***

Despite Max's usual bubbliness, the cold and grey atmosphere could dissuade anyone from talking. Therefore, El and Max found themselves silently making their way to the cafeteria for lunch.

The weather was colder than ever and, even though it was still early noon, the only thing anyone on campus wanted to do anymore was curl up somewhere warm and hibernate.

Eleven and Max had spent most of the morning sitting cross legged on the floor of the redhead's messy room watching a new Netflix show and eating granola bars. Actually, they had originally planned to go to the library, but the snow covered sidewalk and the idea of having to walk fifteen minutes in the chill dissuaded them quite quickly. They were procrastinating for a few hours, making the most of the fact that Max's roommate had morning classes and was out for a few hours.

The cafeteria was almost uncomfortably warm unusually crowded (especially considering the early hour) and El couldn't help the familiar sinking in her stomach at the idea of being around so many people.

After paying for their meal, Max made her way towards an empty table.

"Aren't we eating with your friends today?" El asked, confused.

It was weird. They had been hanging out with Max's soccer friends mostly every day for now and Thursdays were game days.

"Nah, not in the mood to play or talk soccer today," the redhead answered, looking annoyed.

"You okay?"

El had noticed that ever since going with Mike and Lucas to the movies last week Max seemed to be a little moody. Also, the redhead girl had been avoiding spending much time with the guys. Which actually suited Eleven just fine, since she was still trying to get over the Mike fiasco and she figured the best way to do it was keep some distance from him – which was exactly what she'd been trying to do.

However, as the days passed El became increasingly worried.

Max wasn't one to keep quiet about things that bothered her – or about anything really – and every day it seemed she got more pissed.

At first, Eleven wisely decided to give her friend some space, figuring she'd finally talk when she needed to. However, when Max eluded her questions for over a week and even during a heart-to-heart talk (in which El had, by the way, confessed the complete disaster regarding her stupid crush), Eleven knew something was wrong.

"Fucking great," answered Max, stabbing a piece of meat with the fork a little too aggressively, "But do you know who's not okay? Billy, the biggest fucking idiot in the world, is not okay."

Eleven gave her friend a confused look.

"Yeah, that day we went to the movies, he saw that stupid instagram selfie I posted with Lucas and he went full on racist mode," she added.

"Well, you know we can't expect better from him-"

" –No, it's not just Billy, the freaking issue here is that the day I actually find a nice guy I actually like and would really want to date my shitty family has to have a problem with it," Max said angrily.

"But how do you actually know your family, *your mom*, wouldn't approve?"

"I just do, ok?" the redhead answered not looking up from her plate, "and it's not just Billy, I know… I know what my mom would say."

"Maxie, I don't think these kind of opinions from your family should have a say in your love life."

"But what happens if all I want is a normal relationship experience? I mean, for my parents to meet him and his parents to meet me, for me to not feel guilty for coming from a shitty and judgmental family."

Eleven blinked at her friend's confession. It had truly taken her by surprise. It seemed like Max had really given a lot of thought to it. Hell, she had even projected her and Lucas' nonexistent relationship into the future!

"Okay, I get it," El answered slowly, "but no matter how cute I think you two would be, until you give it a chance we won't have a clue if any relationship you guys have will work until that point or not."

The redhead's brow furrowed a bit in what Eleven recognized as a face Max made when she was thinking really hard about something.

She really hoped that her advice made enough sense to her annoyed friend.

-….-…-…-

Tuesdays always seemed like the longest and most tiring days for El. This, probably because they were the busiest days for her, especially in the afternoons when she had several consecutive class periods.

However, even though she now embraced being busy because it managed to shut up the ever-cruel mental voice that always seemed to haunt her, Tuesdays in particular were very trying. Those were the days she could would most vividly remember the friendship that was now probably lost for good. Maybe because on Tuesdays she got out so late from class that there were no distractions around and everything was so quiet and dark that she would start daydreaming of another time in which things seemed brighter and better. Maybe because the first day they hung out together after class happened to be a Tuesday.

Maybe because a Tuesday not so long ago she and Mike had first kissed.

*Stop it*, she mentally chastised herself, *you can't even go there.*

She was now used to blocking her own thoughts when they started going into dangerous territory. It actually helped her feel less shitty all the time.

It was almost 9:30, she noticed suddenly. Everyone in the class seemed anxious to leave, already wanting to be inside their comfy dorms in such a windy night. It made her feel a little bad for the professor though. The class was finally dismissed and El slowly gathered her things, thinking about how she should have asked Will to wait for her so they could walk together at least for a while – and she wouldn't be alone with her own thoughts for long. She was sure her best friend would have understood if she asked.

She walked out of the D building and made her way down the steps, brazing herself against the chilly bite of the night.

"El?"

Too busy over-worrying, as always, she had failed to notice the familiar figure waiting a few feet away.

Eleven stopped mid-step so suddenly she almost fell forward. Luckily (or unluckily?), a gentle pair of gloved hands were there to steady her.

"Wha-who?" she managed to gasp as she regained some control after being initially startled.

She should have known who it was… and she actually did know, she knew from the moment she heard that deep, kind voice. But El had been too afraid that it could be her mind playing some sort of sick game with her pathetic heart.

However, as his hands let go of her arm and she dared to look up at the all too familiar freckles and pale skin and dark eyes, Eleven could not deny it anymore.

"Mike? What in the world are you doing here?" she asked, sounding breathless.

"Are you avoiding me?" he asked.

She blinked at the suddenness of the blunt question. El was at a loss of words.

Was she avoiding him?

"Well… I-" she began, but there was no way to explain something that was so painfully evident.

She had been avoiding him, in an effort to put herself first for once and try to save herself some more heartache.

"Why?" Mike asked, sounding hurt.

"I thought it was better to have some space, after what happened," she answered slowly, trying to figure out the right words.

"But, we talked about this, you said we could still be friends. You understood it was my mistake and said th-that it meant nothing," he said sounding a bit desperate.

El flinched at his words. How could he not see he was so wrong about that last part?

"Maybe…maybe I was wrong and we can't be friends anymore."

"Why, El? I thought this friendship meant more to you… that you would at least explain," he said bitterly.

What was he talking about? Hadn't she been the one to shove her feelings aside for so long just for the sake of their friendship? Hadn't she been the one to choke her hopes and hurt and feelings and freaking dignity to hear him out when he needed to rant about his girlfriend problems?

"We kissed and you froze me out, without any explanation," she reminded him, barely keeping herself together.

"Is this what this is all about? I am so sorry for that kiss, I wished it never happened-"

Every word was like a cold dagger lodging itself into the depths of her heart. Oblivious to her feelings (once again), he continued.

" –But I can't take it back El, I-I-*we* can't undo it and I truly didn't know what to do afterwards, I was so, *so stupid* and tried to avoid it by avoiding you but… we talked about this, I thought you understood."

He was the one who did not understand.

Why should she continue to swallow it down anymore? Why should she be the one with all the burden, after all this time?

"No, Mike. *You're* the one who doesn't get it, who never understood," El said shakily, already feeling the warm tears prickling the corners of her eyes.

She was finally figuring Joyce's advice in its real dimension.

Who was she kidding? She just couldn't be Mike's friend. It would ultimately destroy her.

"That kiss meant *something to me.* It wasn't *nothing*, it wasn't just some random *mistake*, like you keep repeating... I knew how I felt and yet I wasn't trying to act on my feelings, or even expecting or looking for anything else but friendship from you… but, freaking fucking hell, you do give some conflicting signs," she said, almost choking in all the words currently tumbling out of her.

Those were all the words that she'd kept carefully locked inside for so, so long.

"And you *hurt me* when you walked away from me… when you fucking *recoiled away* from me once you realized what had happened," El was almost sobbing by now.

"A-And then I suddenly find out you are in a relationship… and I-you… do you have any idea how that felt like for me? How crushed I felt? You had no reason to tell me when we first met but, I mean, shouldn't you have at least mentioned it or something before I brought it up?"

During all of her rant she hadn't allowed herself even the slightest glance up into his face – that same pale face she still found so endearing (damn her).

But as she took a step back and away from him, she risked a look at him.

Shock and pain were embedded in every single one of his features.

*At least it isn't disgust and hatred*, she thought bitterly.

She couldn't take it anymore. Angrily, El turned her back on him, wiping the tears away with her freezing hands. She hated that she'd given him the chance to see her like this, was she not done humiliating herself for a day?

Purposefully, El began strolling away.

Eleven walked and walked, letting her feet try and carry her away from the pain. Something she knew was no use, since the pain was already lodged up too deep within her. However, the movement helped, it made her feel less powerless and more in control.

The wet tears still streamed down her face allowing the bitter weather to punish her further.

**A/N: So THIS is the angsty moment that was building up between these two for so long and I have to admit it sort of broke my heart to write it. Please don't hate Mike for being a clueless fool! Despite all of us loving him so much, we need to remember that he is not perfect and, at times, he can be selfish like all of us.**

**As always, I am really happy to read your thoughts about the chapter and the story in general!**

# 8. Feels like there's oceans between

**A/N: Wow! It was great for me to read your reviews on the last chapter, I copletely agree that El had to say something at some point. Anyway, there's some well deserved Mileven here, I hope you like it though, I've sort of really debated with myself a lot about the twist I wanted to give this story.**

Chapter 8: Feels like there's oceans between you and me

***Saturday 3rd, February 2018***

Despite the few people in the dark classroom, there was a companionable silence in the room.

Well, except for the soft dialogues and vibrant music.

Will had invited El to one of the movie screenings of the AV and Cinema Club, of which he was a member. She knew that despite being such a small thing, this particular event meant a lot for him. Especially since he had been the one in charge of the theme and logistics this weekend. Eleven thought it was really nice that her best friend had found an extracurricular activity he enjoyed so much.

On the other hand, Max's big date with Lucas was tonight and, if it weren't for Will's random phone call that afternoon, El knew she'd probably be spending another Saturday holed up on her room. Max asking Lucas out had actually taken everyone by surprise. And although Eleven was pretty damn proud of her friend, she had been a tiny bit worried about her friend's sheer boldness. The last thing El wanted was to see her friend get hurt.

Of course, it turned out there was nothing to worry about, since Lucas was obviously interested in Max (he would be an idiot if he wasn't) and had enthusiastically agreed. The two girls had spent most of the morning having a lot of laughs while getting ready for Max's date. El had to admit, it had actually been pretty fun to try and strengthen the redhead's abundant and beautiful wavy hair and help her choose her outfit. It had been such mindless fun and Eleven couldn't have been happier for the distraction.

The two of them were spending a lot of time together lately. Actually, Max had been the first one El had called once she'd gotten to her room that fateful night, after pouring out all of her feelings to an unsuspecting Mike. After the depressing phone call, the redhead girl had unexpectedly showed up in El's room with what she called an Emergency Kit – which consisted in lots of bags of Oreos and chips. They'd stayed up late that night, talking and crying over past and present heartbreaks and laughing at the stupid jokes in the four Adam Sandler movies they watched in a row.

And now El was happy for Max. She knew in her heart that Lucas would be good to her, he was just the kind of person her friend needed to balance her out. They helped each other be better, wasn't that what a relationship should be about?

However, right now, Eleven felt really glad to be spending time with Will for a change. Lately, it seemed that their schedules kept conflicting and they barely ever hung out together anymore. Which was actually sad. It was always been so easy and comfortable to spend time with her best friend, especially since his unusual perceptiveness always allowed him to read her mood perfectly. Plus, Will had always seemed to have a calming effect on her, with his quiet and wise presence.

As she immersed herself in the dramatic French movie Will had picked for the afternoon and they were currently watching, El couldn't help but decide to come to these screenings more often. If it weren't for Jonathan and Will, she would know only the basics about films – actually, it was yet another reason to be thankful for the Byers.

It was amazing, she thought, how convincingly the two main actresses were conveying their feelings. How heartbreaking it could be to witness the beginning and the fall out of a love story in the span of a few hours.

The screening was over sooner than she'd expected, and some of the people (including Will) had gathered in a small circle to discuss the themes and the art and the story and the hidden metaphors. Despite feeling the conversation was quite interesting, El couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling welling up inside her. The feeling that kept

reminding her that she didn't belong her.

She hated feeling this way.

Recently, after learning some more about what her anxiety was about, Eleven had decided to fight back.

Inconspicuously, El took a couple of deep, calming breaths. It was important to remind herself that these sort of situations shouldn't have to ignite the fight-or-flight instinct in her. Afterwards, it was all a bit better.

When it was all over, they walked through the darkened campus.

"Thanks for staying through everything," Will said.

"It was actually alright," she answered sincerely, "I'll probably stop by often."

The small boy smiled at her.

"I'm glad you seem better lately, El."

Of course he meant the fact that she was slowly getting over her fall out with Mike, of which he knew all about.

"Yeah… stuff gets easier with time, you know?"

Will gave her a sympathetic look.

The first couple of weeks had been harder than she'd expected, for sure. She'd spent a lot of time thinking back to the whole incident and wondering if it had been the right thing to do. Also, it still hurt to realize where her stupid hope had gotten her once again. Now, however, the hurt was mostly hindered by the fact that she was mostly ashamed for all the embarrassing crap she'd let out. The whole situation was made worse, however, since she would occasionally bump unexpectedly with Mike around campus and relieve all of the damned feelings that got them there in the first place.

She knew he wanted to talk to her and figure stuff out, he'd been texting nonstop for quite a few days now. But she decided that if she

couldn't get over her feelings, then she should get over him altogether.

It was probably for the best, she knew, that she'd finally had the strength to come clean and stop that whole masochistic situation for good.

It was probably for the best that she'd stopped everything before it got out of hand again and she was left hurting.

"That just about sums up my whole high school experience," Will smiled, attempting a weak joke and successfully interrupting El's line of thought.

Eleven smiled at her best friend, seeing in his face all the worry he felt for her.

She was truly lucky to have him in her life.

And to have Max.

"How do you feel about going for dessert? I haven't had a good cheesecake in forever," she suddenly asked, remembering the small café near her dorm building.

-….-…-…-

***Sunday 25th, February 2018***

She woke up to an insistent knock on her bedroom door.

What the actual hell?

*Must be the girl next door, locked out of her room and asking to crash on the spare bed again*, her sleepy mind suddenly remembered.

Well, she could wait some more.

The knocking, however, turned into pounding.

Grumpily, Eleven threw the door open, cursing the day she allowed the neighbor to crash for a few hours as a random act of kindness.

She took in the person in her doorway. It was Max.

"Why aren't you answering your phone?" the redhead asked as she made her way into El's bedroom and unceremoniously plopped on her messy bed.

"It's *eight* o'clock on a Sunday, I was sleeping," the brown-haired girl replied with a roll of her eyes. Then, she made a point to yawn as dramatically as possible.

"This is *so* worth a couple of less hours of sleep. I sent you like a thousand messages, Ellie."

"Fine, what's the emergency? Because it better be urgent," Eleven groaned, as she laid on the spare, empty bed and closed her eyes.

El was so not a morning person.

"First of all, shower, get dressed nicely… and do something with your hair," Max said, as she stared at El critically.

"What? Why?" El complained, rubbing her eyes and still lying in the spare bed.

She was suddenly feeling a bit self-conscious.

"Come on!" the redhead exclaimed, pulling Eleven out of the bed, "I promise you'll *love* what I've planned," she added cryptically.

Still groaning and muttering a string of complaints, El slowly did as her friend said, while Max waited patiently for her, texting excitedly all the time.

An hour later, Eleven was clean and dressed up in an oversized mustard-colored sweater and black leggings. Her brown hair was still hopeless though, and she bit her lip as she tried to comb it into compliance. Max sighed as she saw her friend's struggle with her messy hair.

"Come over here Ellie, I'll braid it for you," the redhead said patting the comforter beside her. Max was quite nimble with her fingers, always had been, and actually enjoyed doing people's hair.

"Will you finally tell me what's up today?" Eleven asked.

"So the long version… Lucas had four tickets for this ridiculous comedy show at the city since like last year or something, he was planning to go with the guys. Turns out I showed up and then he can't help but prefer me instead, since his favorite comedian ever is going to be there or something."

Eleven snorted at Max's narration. Of course Lucas would prefer a Sunday with Max, he spent time with his friends every day!

"A fun Lumax Sunday?" joked El, knowing her friend got annoyed whenever she mentioned the ship name she'd come up with for them, "What's that have to do with old, grumpy me?"

Max pulled her hair a little in retaliation as she made the final twist in the loose French braid she'd been working on.

"Well, you see, Lucas couldn't just choose someone to un-invite. Plus, I thought that maybe *you'd* like to go to the city for a change-"

"– Max, who's got the fourth ticket?" asked Eleven as dread suddenly balled up in the pit of her stomach.

Apparently, now that the redhead was finally and officially dating Lucas, it was okay for them to hang out together with the guys again. All of them. However, the few times El had finally agreed to hang out as a group (not an easy task for Max to achieve), the awkwardness between her and Mike was obvious to everyone. Especially when she ignored him as much as possible and he sported a sad and hurt look all the time.

Actually, El had the feeling that their group of friends already knew the gory details of what had happened. She noticed the guys and even Max try to make things better, but there was really not much they could do. El refused to talk, see or even text Mike back, still too mortified and hurt. Thankfully, Mike had almost altogether stopped insisting they talk (she now only got an occasional text every other day) and he hadn't waited for her after class again since their last talk (something she had been anxious about).

*Oh no, hell no.*

Max had been trying to get her to agree to talk to Mike for a while now and she wouldn't budge. Apparently they'd been talking a lot for a few weeks now, a fact that Eleven tried not to dwell on too much. The redhead had told El several times that she'd given Mike shit for what happened and he'd seemed really sorry. Unfortunately, that was still just not enough for Eleven. Of course it made her feel guilty, but she needed more time on her own to figure out how she felt about it and if she could get over it completely.

Plus, El had decided not to stomp on her own feelings again because of guilt or anything or anyone.

"So, I texted Will yesterday about it but he was really busy, big test or project or something… and then I thought about someone else you might feel comfortable around-"

Mike. She just *knew it.*

"-Tim," Max said.

The dread subsided significantly. But… wait, what?

"Are you setting me up on a date with your sporty friend?" El asked horrified.

"Not a date, just, you know, a couple of friends going to the city for lunch and a show-"

"With another couple? More like a double date," Eleven said cynically, "I can't believe you'd do this to me Max."

"Oh, Ellie, you'll thank me later, I promise," the redhead answered, her blue eyes full of sympathy, "You know it's not as if I'm pushing you guys together or anything."

That's almost what Will had said all those months ago to get her to go with him and his friends to that stupid, fateful party.

"I'm only trying to get you to experiment some things and just get out there and we both know you wouldn't have agreed if I'd asked you

beforehand… I still remember Valentine's day," Max continued, giving her friend a pointed look.

"It worries me that you're always on your own, Ellie."

"I'm *not*. I hang out with Will and you and Lucas… and your soccer friends," El replied weakly, already seeing the meaning behind her friend's words.

Max gave her a see-what-I'm-talking-about look.

"You look beautiful El, we'll have a great time!"

The two friends hurried outside. Apparently, Max had agreed with Lucas to be picked up from El's dorm at eleven, since they were planning to have lunch in the city and the ride there took a good couple of hours.

As expected, Lucas was a punctual guy and by the time they were outside the building, he was already parked, waiting for them. Tim was sitting in the seat beside him, looking genuinely happy.

As soon as they saw the girls, Tim got out so Max could ride shotgun next to her boyfriend. El gave him a shy smile. He was nice enough, she figured, but she just wasn't ready or willing to have her hopes hurt her again.

The two-hour ride was fun enough. Everyone showed of their singing skills (or lack thereof). It turned out that Lucas and Eleven were the only ones who could actually sing in tune, but the four of them had a lot of fun butchering the lyrics of the popular songs on the radio. El hadn't laughed that much in quite a long while.

-….-…-…-

"Again, why are you doing this babe?" Lucas asked in amusement as he watched his pretty girlfriend smiling devilishly.

They were sitting in a coffee shop, having muffins and hot drinks with fancy names they couldn't pronounce. The comedy show had been hilarious and had just ended. However, none of them had wanted to return to college so soon, so they'd decided to delay the

ride back for a while. Max was currently making the most of the fact that El was still standing waiting for her drink and Tim was in the bathroom. Eleven had carelessly left her purse with Max and the redhead was now spamming the brown-haired girl's social media accounts by posting a ton of pictures of their day out. Mainly pictures of El and Tim she'd took without any of them noticing.

"Just trying to prove a hypothesis," Max answered cryptically, smiling widely as she wrote a ridiculously girly quote under one of the pictures.

"That Eleven's love for you does have a limit?"

"No silly," she said, looking at Lucas as if he was crazy and finally tucking the phone carefully inside El's black bag, "I'm playing the double agent here, remember?"

Lucas snickered, knowing what she meant all too well.

"You'll fix everything, like you always do," Lucas said in amazement, as he finally figured his girlfriend's plan.

Unable to help himself, he planted a loud kiss on Max's laughing mouth.

"Gross, no making out during meals please," El said, sitting in one of the empty chairs and pretending to gag.

The ride home was a lot quiet in comparison to the ride to the city. Mostly because everyone was quite tired after the long day.

El stared out of the foggy window, watching the city slowly disappear behind them.

-….-…-…-

***Tuesday 27th, February 2018 (Nighttime – late)***

"Ellie, wake up, we're at your dorm!" Max said loudly, successfully managing to wake her friend from her slumber.

Against her better judgment, El had fallen asleep in Lucas' car during

the short ride. There was something about the soft rocking of moving cars that had always relaxed her. Plus, her week already sucked despite it being only the beginning of the week. She had had so many essays due that day that she hadn't slept at all Monday night. Needless to say, she was tired as hell.

Thankfully, Max and Lucas had kindly offered to pick her up whenever her classes ended too late (mostly Tuesdays), so she wouldn't have to make the twenty minute walk home alone in the cold.

She was dreading getting out of the warm car and facing the biting cold of the wind. And having to tortuously climb the flight of stairs to her room. Yawning, she got out of the car, thinking about her warm bed as motivation as she struggled to make her way up the stairs.

There was someone sitting on her hall, with the back to her room's wooden door.

Not just someone… She could have recognized him even miles away.

Actually, now that the situation she was feeling so anxious about was finally happening, El was surprised to discover she was feeling rather calm. She couldn't keep postponing the inevitable conversation that had been due days, even weeks ago.

His floppy black hair was hanging over his eyes. Eleven sighed, apparently, he'd fallen asleep waiting for her to show up. She was surprised that nobody had come to kick him out yet.

Sighing, she kneeled in front of him.

Wordlessly, Eleven shook him gently, hoping it would be enough to wake him.

"El?" his dark sleepy eyes focused on her, "Oh."

Suddenly, almost as if he'd realized where he was and why, Mike straightened up.

"We, um, we need to talk," he said hesitatingly.

"I know," she conceded with a sigh as she settled beside him, with her back on the hard door to her bedroom.

It was silent for a while, neither of them knew what to say or how to begin the conversation.

"You know, there's actually a good reason why I never mention Bex," suddenly said Mike in a hushed voice, "It's actually very complicated and, um, it has a lot to do with a promise I made a while ago, but… well, I can tell you about it now."

Eleven could not deny that she was very intrigued; however, she was not expecting to talk about that, about *her*, so soon.

"We've always been friends, we were neighbors too for a while. Actually, she was the only girl who would talk to me when I hit my awkward phase," Mike said with a sad smile, "and I kind of had a crush on her."

"So, we were fourteen and there was this birthday party," he continued quietly, "they made everybody go down to the basement to play that stupid spin the bottle or seven minutes in heaven game, I don't know, but I just… I felt that it was important to wait on that kind of stuff. So I stayed upstairs. I just wanted those sort of things to mean something, you know?"

Despite knowing he wouldn't see her, since he was currently looking at his long legs splayed out beneath him, El nodded.

"And Bex… she got to finally kiss her crush, this cute girl in our year. And it would have been okay, I guess, if she'd had come out of the closet by then and people in our town weren't so closed-minded. But I mean, we were fourteen, she'd told a few people and her family but nobody took it seriously… her mom was convinced that it was just a phase."

"But I guess she made it too obvious or something back then, I don't know, I wasn't there. Next thing I knew, she went up to find me and she was crying and she was just so desperate, so sad. It confused me to see her like that. Bex… she'd always been so strong but she was crumbling down and all I wanted to do was help her, she was my

friend."

Mike paused for a while, almost as if it overwhelmed him to remember.

"So I listened to her and then kissed her. And I don't know if she felt anything at all, but it was my first kiss and that made it special. Thinking back, it was probably the worst thing to do at the moment," he said, the ghost of a smile on his face, "That night, she asked me to go on a date with her, and she said that it would make our lives easier."

"I, um, guessed she meant the bullying she did get occasionally," he didn't need to say what about, it seemed pretty obvious.

She been a witness of what he meant, being Will's best friend since they were twelve years old. El understood just how hard it could be for someone to pretend to be someone they were not, to suppress their feelings because of shame. She thought back on how Will always seemed depressed during high school, how hard it was for him to get up and just function throughout the day. El remembered him saying how he was so glad he had a best friend and a family who loved him for who he was. Plus, Joyce took it into her own hands to make it clear that bullying was completely forbidden in the Hawkins school system.

Bex had had no support from her family, from her own mother. She'd had no authority stand up for her.

"But the times we went out… it was like nothing had changed and we were still friends and it was pretty damn confusing for me because I still had this crush on her. To anyone else in town, however, we were like an item."

"And Bex was right, once people saw our relationship lasted, the teasing and insults and mocking finally stopped for her. And people seemed to forget about that one incident, her mom was s-*so happy*," Mike continued, his voice sounding almost flat, "And I got used to it, it was easy…we'd always been real good together and pretty much nothing had changed. In public we would hold hand and occasionally kiss and in private, among ourselves, we would hang out like we

always had."

"Everything was fine throughout high school. I didn't need anything else to be happy. But she did. I sort of knew how she really felt, but we never once talked about it… I knew it killed her inside to have to pretend so much and it killed her to think she was leading me on and, sort of using me."

"Which… she kind of was?" He smiled a bit at that, "But I was totally using her too. I wouldn't get teased either about not having a girlfriend and it was *just so easy* to pretend. I didn't need anything else, I'd never felt anything for anyone that would make me want to end whatever we had."

"Suddenly, everyone seemed to be getting ready for prom and, obviously, we were each other's dates. I said that we didn't have to go, I knew she was in a really, really bad place at the time and she wasn't excited at all about it."

El thought back to how Will and she had spent prom night having a movie marathon, none of them in the mood to witness everyone being so happy when they were both feeling so depressed.

"But, for a while that night, everything actually seemed fine… but the night ended and she reverted back into the unhappy shell she'd been hiding in. I had rented a room for the night, because it was what was expected. And I never even thought about anything else happening... Um, but she… sh-well she suddenly wanted to have sex."

"She said it was the normal thing to do on prom night. That we had to do it."

"But things had never been like that between us. And it just didn't feel right… It was sort of like taking advantage of each other's weaknesses. And we just weren't that kind of couple, that's not what our relationship was about and I knew she didn't really want, uh, *that*. So I had to stop her."

Eleven didn't need to know much about life and relationships to understand that not many guys would have acted like did.

"Bex stopped talking to me, she avoided me during the last few weeks of school. In fact, she left for the summer with her family and never returned any of my texts, emails or phone calls," he continued, "And, well, we both went to different colleges and that seemed to be it for good… even though we'd never really had a chance to properly break up back then."

**A/N: By the way, the movie Will and El are watching at the beginning of the chapter is actually "Blue is the warmest color", have any of you watched it? It's such a great movie about how it's like to love an artist, the story is just beautiful. Anyway, I decided to exclude the name of the movie from the story since it could be too much of a foreshadow and even almost a spoiler for the ending of this chapter.**

# 9. Could it be another change?

**A/N: I hope you like this chapter! It sort of has a different structure from all the previous ones.**

Chapter 9: Could it be another change?

***Still Tuesday 27th, February 2018 (Nighttime – really late)***

The hallway was deserted and pretty much quiet. Maybe because it was a weekday.

El peeked at the tall boy currently sitting sprawled next to her. He seemed to have sensed it was all quite a lot to take in so suddenly, so they'd been quiet for a while, waiting for her to stop feeling so awkward.

"So… what happened?" Eleven finally asked.

Mike timidly glanced at her, the hesitation currently clouding his face ebbing away noticeably once he realized there was no trace of anger or disbelief in El's expression.

"A few weeks into my second month in college she called me," Mike said after a few silent minutes dragged by, "I didn't really know what to say, we'd been keeping our distance for months. But she was crying… her grandfather, who ironically was the only one in her family who didn't pretend that she was anyone else than who she really was, had had a heart attack and passed away."

She remembered him telling her about Bex's grandfather passing away but, now that there was more to it, everything somehow seemed even more tragic.

"She called me because I was the only person who knew how much her grandfather meant to her. With him gone, there was nothing tying her to our hometown anymore."

"Was that the reason you were so upset that night and wouldn't explain why?" El asked, trying to piece things together.

Mike glanced at her, his dark eyes looking troubled.

Despite everything, there was something that still didn't make sense to El. Why couldn't Mike have explained all of this before? Why did he choose to avoid her when she should've trusted her?

… When she deserved to know at least *something*, not everything but maybe just enough not to have given in to her silly feelings.

That would have saved both of them a lot of trouble. And her, at least, some heartache.

"I realized there really was no reason for us to keep holding onto each other the way we had in high school," Mike answered honestly, "College… is different from high school. Bigger. Open-minded."

"She finally figured out that she didn't want to pretend anymore and that's what it took for me to realize that I shouldn't have to hide my feelings either."

His expressive dark eyes were boring into her, she could feel it almost like a physical touch, but El could not bring herself to face his freckled face and deep, honest gaze. Truth was, she was still afraid that it could all end up badly again.

"I should have just said something back then. I-I know that now… But I was just so *confused* and felt so guilty all the time."

Nothing – not his answers, not his frustration, not his words – were making any sense to Eleven. She didn't *want* to understand the implications.

"You see, I met this amazing girl who I couldn't seem to stop thinking about. It was nothing like I had felt or experienced before. But I messed it up and I could never make up for it," he said quietly, his voice merely above a whisper in the already silent hallway.

She could feel warm, heavy tears prickling the corners of her eyes and she couldn't figure out if they were due to the frustration, hope, sadness, or heartbreak she currently felt caught in her throat.

"But I realized I did not know how it was to actually date and *be* with

someone for real. I had no idea of how it was like to *not be* in a fake relationship," he answered.

"I… I had been too lazy and comfortable to get out of it because it spared me from the awkwardness of actually having to flirt and talk and get myself *out there* and actually allow myself to *feel something real* for someone."

Eleven blinked as his words filled the tensioned air around them almost like a living presence. She finally allowed the traitorous tears to fall.

Mike was pretty much describing the same sort of sentiment she experienced whenever she thought about feelings and relationships and romance: Fear.

The irony of the situation was not lost on her.

Of course he had actually had a reason to avoid all of the emotional trouble. Unlike herself, he'd had an *excuse* to run away from his feelings. Meanwhile, she had been worrying all those months and coming up with excuses.

Now she could quite clearly identify the feeling boiling inside her. It was frustration, roaring like a wounded monster in her chest and mind: *it's not fair it's not fair it's not fair it's not fair*, it repeated.

"Why didn't you say anything before?" she asked, trying to keep her voice from breaking too much, "About how you felt, I mean. I would have tried to understand."

"Before, I had never felt like I needed to have a real relationship, but I was starting to have a lot of doubts ever since I met you and that made me feel guilty. I didn't want to admit it even to myself… I needed time to sort everything out."

She was glad he was finally opening up to her about this. However, Mike's last statement had left her reeling, wondering about everything all at once. He was afraid of his own feelings for her, pretty much like she had tried to deny and suppress what she felt for him.

"So have we basically been having the same sort of insecurities over our feelings for each other?" asked El, offering him a small smile.

Mike only managed a shaky laugh at the absurdity of their situation. If they wouldn't have been so stubborn hiding and questioning their feelings maybe things wouldn't have escalated for the worst like they actually had.

*What if?*

That was the big question and, at that moment, both of them were sitting in the middle of an empty, silent hallway thinking about the possibilities.

Maybe in another universe, in another reality, another Mike and another El could have figured it out sooner. Maybe, this very Tuesday night they would be hanging out together, but on a whole different tune.

-….-…-…-

It had taken a while to rebuild their friendship.

The day after Mike and El's long talk in the hallway was the first one in which the whole Party – Dustin, Will, El, Lucas, Max, and Mike – had lunch together after a long while. At first, the atmosphere was a bit tensioned, all of the friends hesitant about the apparent peace. Dustin, however, had been the unexpected savior.

"Does anyone else agree with me that there was plenty of comedic material that the new Jumanji movie didn't take advantage of?" the curly haired boy had suddenly piped up with a serious expression, alarming everyone for a second.

"I mean, come on. They cast both the Rock *and* Jack Black!" he exclaimed throwing his hands in the air and almost knocking Lucas's tray off the table.

None of them – not even Lucas, who had an aggravated expression after almost losing his meal – had managed to stay immune to Dustin's contagious humor.

-…-

Mike and El hadn't had the chance to talk on their own again. The subject of their (romantic?) feelings for each other seemed forgotten between them – though it was something that very much preoccupied them in their own way. If they were to talk about it, they would have agreed that it was still too soon to try to figure that out.

Despite feeling restless about it and confused because there had been no chance to talk about it further, El had figured this was for the best, since it would probably be too soon and it could jeopardize their still-fragile friendship. On his part, an equally confused and restless Mike had decided to give El some time to figure her feelings out and forgive him; actually, he was afraid of pouring his heart out to her and be rejected.

*What if?*

Unbeknownst to both of the stubborn young adults, *if* they had had the conversation they were both awaiting and dreading, they could have found out that they stood pretty much on the same page.

-…-

It hadn't taken long before the six of them began hanging out after class and on the weekends like they used to at the end of last year. The Party got together almost every day for meals – except for those days Max and El usually spent time with Max's soccer friends – and free periods. El's empty dorm room had suddenly become the unofficial gathering place for when they hung out to chill and escape the cold weather outside.

However, the fact that Lucas and Max were a couple now also meant that Eleven got to spend a lot of time with Dustin and Will… and, of course, Mike.

It seemed that every minute El and Mike spent together, the iceberg of tension shielding their relationship melted a bit. Which was great, especially since the relief in their friends' demeanor (due to the end of the tension between them) was evident.

-…-

Twelve days after Mike and El's long talk in the hallway, Max's friend, Tim, asked Eleven out on a proper date. The redhead girl had actually warned her naïve friend about it a few days in advance, but El had stubbornly refused to believe it. She would never admit it out loud, but the idea that anyone could be interested in her romantically, still hit a sore place in her heart and feelings.

As soon as Tim had confidently approached her during one of the psych classes they shared, his cocky stance giving him away, El felt her stomach sinking. But, *why?* Why was she dreading this so much?

She couldn't quite figure it out. Was she really that damaged? Was she really *that* scared of relationships and feelings?

*If that was true,* she thought, *wouldn't the best solution be to finally get herself in a relationship and confront her fear?*

-…-

On Thursday, March the 15th, Eleven waited outside the building she had just had class in. She was waiting for Tim to come pick her up for their date. She nervously played with the (bit long) sleeve of her new soft beige sweater, trying to stop her overactive mind from thinking too much about everything.

She tried not to think about how he was running late.

Much like the last time they hung out outside campus, Max had helped with her hair and outfit. The understanding redhead had also patiently listened to all of El's self-doubts and mostly-incoherent rambles.

For Max everything came down to a simple question: *why not?*

When faced with it, except for the weird sensation at the pit of her stomach, Eleven hadn't been able to really find a good reason to refuse.

Tim finally arrived, looking weird in a dress shirt and without his usual sneakers. Nevertheless, he looked good, like he always did, El

observed with the tiniest hint of indifference. They walked all the way downtown, making small, pleasant talk. Afterwards, Tim took her for dinner to the classiest restaurant their small college town had to offer. However, despite the food being amazing and Tim being his usual charming self, Eleven couldn't help but feel a bit out of place at the restaurant.

Sitting in the comfy booth, surrounded by happy couples and seemingly perfect nuclear families, El couldn't stop herself from thinking this was exactly where she always dreamed of fitting in. Feeling guilty for the direction her mind had steered towards, and not wanting Tim to catch up on her unrest, she faked a smile for the nice boy sitting across from her.

Eleven spent the rest of the evening feeling pleasantly numb, listening to Tim's funny sport anecdotes and piping in whenever he mentioned one of their psych classes.

*He is nice enough, he is smart and he is handsome*, she concluded by the end of their date, as they walked home.

When they finally neared her building, Tim turned towards her to say goodbye. El kissed him on the cheek and thanked him for a nice time. She genuinely liked him, he was a nice guy. But her heart did not flutter when he had held her hand as they walked home and the quick brush of her lips against his cheek hadn't elicited any stirring inside her chest.

Tim was a good guy.

Why wasn't it enough?

Why did it seem she was just waiting for something, biding the time until *something else* finally happened?

-…-

Tim asked her out on another date.

El graciously declined – she had already made plans to go to another screening of the AV and Cinema Club with Will. And, truth be told, she had truly become a fan of the films the club selected.

It turned out that most of the Party – except for Max and Lucas – ended up going to the screening of Donnie Darko.

They all reacted differently to it, each coming up with their own theory of what the heck all of it meant. For Mike, the plot was clearly about the scientific possibility of wormholes suddenly causing inter-dimensional travels. For Dustin (who fell asleep sometime during the middle of the movie but would never admit it), hardcore drugs probably explained the plot. For El, the story had a lot to do with the infinite possibilities reality could take. For Will, the movie was a confusing tale about parallel dimensions that ultimately explained the main character's acceptance of his tragic fate.

After the screening, the four of them went to a nearby diner.

"The thing is, was that creepy rabbit costume necessary?" Dustin asked, interrupting Mike's enthusiastic explanation of the wormhole theory.

"It added to the suspense, I think," Will intervened thoughtfully.

"Why couldn't they just put the shot guy instead?" Dustin retorted.

"Because it wouldn't have worked as well with the cryptic atmosphere of the movie," Will answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"What's not cryptic about a dead, eyeless guy following anoher guy around?!" exclaimed Dustin, widening his eyes comically.

"It's an artistic metaphor!" shot back Will, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

The usually quiet and peaceful Will was surprising them all by the minute. Dustin, who loved winning any and all arguments, took the quiet boy's attitude as challenge. Eleven and Mike, on the other hand, shared a quick glance as they watched the exchange between the two boys like it was a ping pong match.

A small, unnoticed smile creeped on El's face. There was no other way she would be rather spending that evening.

-…-…-

*The only time I feel good falling*

*Is when I'm falling fast and hard for you*

El was sitting on the copilot seat of Mike's car, humming along to the soft tune playing on her phone and looking out the window. Carelessly allowing the breeze to mess with her wavy brown hair.

Ever since she could remember, car rides were simple things that had always made her feel happy and calm.

*The only time I feel good sinking*

*Is when I'm sinking fast and deep for you*

*You caught me as I was winking*

*Now I think my winking days are through*

Max and Lucas had been planning a date out in the city for a few weeks. A situation that had actually suited Eleven just fine, since she was planning on going the city to buy something nice for Joyce to send her on Mother's Day.

The original plan was for Lucas to drive the three of them to the nearest city on Sunday morning.

However, none of them had counted on the fact that Lucas' car was still unfixed – and, apparently, beyond repair. A situation that prompted Lucas to ask for Mike's car. The tall young man, being the thoughtful person he was (and knowing Lucas' carelessness with cars), had offered to drive them there.

Which is how the four of them found themselves in the same position they had just a few months ago.

However, things were different now.

-…-

*Could it be another change*

*To come and rearrange?*

*Why can't you just feel that way I do?*

Despite the initial awkwardness between them after their friends left for their date, El and Mike spent all of that Sunday together. They went shopping for Mother Day's gifts for Karen and Joyce and went to an IHOP for a (really) late lunch – which was really an insanely big portion of waffles for both of them.

"I didn't remember you were such a messy eater," Mike chortled when he saw the way the sticky syrup and whipped cream were currently scattered around El's lips and mouth ike she was a small child.

She frowned at him in annoyance and, not even caring about what he might think, tried licking the syrup and cream off the corners of her mouth.

Still chuckling and without even thinking about it, Mike leaned in to wipe the mess off her sweet face – no pun intended – with a paper napkin. The moment the napkin touched her, however, their gazes locked and she couldn't stop a pink blush from tinting her neck and cheeks.

El took the paper napkin away from him, ignoring the way their finger had brushed against each other, and promptly cleaned herself up.

*The only time I feel good falling*

*Is when I'm falling fast and hard for you*

By the time they were done eating, they were surprised to see that it would only be a couple of hours before they had to meet with Max and Lucas to go back to campus. They decided to go on a stroll around a nearby park.

Except for a mother with her two kids, the place was almost empty. On an impulse, El ran towards the swings, giggling as she used her long legs to propel herself upwards. Mike watched her as she tilted

her head backwards, towards the darkening sky, and closed her eyes.

A soft smile made its way across his broad mouth and he went to join her.

*I can't tell if you are stalling*

*So if you are please tell me what to do*

-…-

The night Will had been rushed to the hospital, the five other member of the Party had all gone with their friend. It had been a long, stressful couple of hours until the doctor told them that Will only suffered from a mild case of viral meningitis. Since it made no sense to return to the campus to sleep only a couple of hours, the five of them decided to spend the rest of the night in the hospital waiting room.

El found herself unable to sleep, too jittery to even lie down still. Those last few hours, fearing for Will's health and thinking about all the horrible possibilities, had been some of the hardest of her entire life. She had quietly tiptoed out onto the empty street, trying not to wake up her tired friends, and sat down on the pavement.

The cold air had been just what she needed to clear her head and let go of the horrible sensations and thoughts tormenting her. She breathed in and out and almost didn't make out the sound of soft footsteps approaching her.

Mike sat down beside her, looking equally shaken. They didn't need words to share what had brought them both out there. They sat in silent for a long while, until the darkness began to dissipate.

-…-

Almost instinctively, El tilted her body towards Mike, relishing the warmth and comfort she desperately needed. She tucked her head on his shoulder and he placed his cheek on the top of her head.

Maybe because he was beginning to feel really sleepy, Mike hesitantly gave in and touched her soft wavy hair. El closed her eyes

at the feel of his long fingers brushing her neck and back tenderly.

Trying not to overthink it (and maybe because she was getting sort of sleepy too), El found enough courage to place one her arms around his tall frame, resulting in an awkward sort of hug.

When a haggard-looking Dustin barged out of the building, he saw them cuddling together on the middle of the mostly empty street. As he approached, he saw Eleven's head resting awkwardly on Mike's shoulder, both of her arms around his friend's upper body.

One of his hands was stroking her back very gently, very carefully.

Very lovingly.

*Could it be?* Dustin thought.

-…-

The iceberg had finally melted.

**A/N: The next chapter is supposed to be the last! This freaks me out since this would be the first time I would finish writing a fanfic. About that, I was thinking I might make the story longer than 10 chapters, how would you feel about that? Please let me know what you think!**

**Thanks to all of you who took the time to review, I really appreciated it as I was sort of in a bad place (writer-wise). Your comments are my main motivation to keep going forward with this story.**

# 10. First day of my life

**A/N: THIS IS THE FINAL CHAPTER GUYS! FINALLY.**

Chapter 10: First day of my life

***Wednesday 9th, May 2018***

If there was something El Ives put her mind to, she was sure to accomplish it. Always.

Well, most of the times.

As a matter of fact, today was one of those times in which she had made up her mind about something. And she was really hoping everything went well enough.

Max and Will were currently sprawled on the spare bed in her dorm room with their shoes off, comfortable enough around each other after so much time spent together that they didn't seem to mind laying almost on top of one another (because of the small surface of the mattress). Meanwhile, Eleven sat cross-legged on her soft beige carpet, trying to paint her finger nails without smudging the polish around her fingers too much.

At the same time, Will was glancing amused between his phone screen and the two girls in the room who were talking nonstop about whatever. Max was frowning down at her hands in concentration, also trying to paint her nails (in a pitch black shade) – though she managed to do it with slightly better results than Eleven. For the brunette girl, doing such a thing was an almost impossible task: this since her hand kept trembling due to both her nervousness and her lack of practice at these sort of things.

Both of her friends were currently in El's room mainly for moral support. And she had desperately needed it, since merely two hours ago she'd been dangerously tumbling on the verge of an anxiety attack.

And this was probably the worst day and time ever to get one of

those.

Today was important.

Maybe because it was, Eleven hadn't been able to prevent herself from thinking nonstop about all the ways in which she could ruin this for herself. And she just could *not* afford to mess this up and self-sabotage herself like she had so many times before. However, and despite her efforts to be and stay positive, the anxiety had been building slowly since everything started two weeks ago.

Fourteen days ago, El had gotten an email from her Research Methods professor, congratulating her on her final project – which she had thrown herself completely into for almost the entire semester – and informing her that it had been one of the two chosen ones to be presented before the faculty.

It was kind of a big deal: she would have to do a presentation about the most important work she'd ever done in her entire life (so far).

Despite her trying to keep a calm attitude about it, Eleven had been high key freaking out for over ten days now. After all, this was a chance that definitely could make or break her dreams of being a psychologist and helping people one day.

Max and Will – aka Eleven's fairy godparents – had spent most of the weekend with her, shopping for something cute and classy she could wear on her special event (happening tonight!). Plus, already knowing (and dreading) how nervous she could get, both of them had shown up unexpectedly earlier that day to offer much needed advice, chocolates, and support – well, actually, both of them had pretty much thrown themselves in the unoccupied bed and talked about old 80s bands while munching on the semi-bitter chocolates they'd brought for their friend.

El was not complaining.

In fact, today (The Day Of) she'd woken up feeling anxious as hell. A situation that hadn't been helped at all by the fact that the two classes she had that day had been cancelled, therefore giving her nothing else to focus on until the afternoon. Actually, if it hadn't been

for Will and Max's prompt and voluntary help, she'd probably be a ball of nerves right now… well, more of a ball of nerves than she currently was.

For that, she was immensely grateful.

On the other hand, Eleven felt more reassured now that Will and Max were here because she wouldn't have to make all the important decisions on her own – for instance: hairstyle, shoes, and so on. Plus, she wanted them to give their opinions about the speech she had planned for tonight.

Once the soft pink polish on her fingernails had dried, El sighed in relief as she patiently started cleaning the mess around them. The loud voice of her red head friend and the amused one of her best friend were filling the room and Eleven couldn't help a big smile. She still had time to spare until the event.

After heading for an early lunch after a whole morning together, Will had to leave since he had an essay to turn in. On the other hand, since Max had decided to skip class for a day anyway ("when you do something, do it well"), the two girls were left on their own. Soon enough, the lively redhead had managed to take Eleven's mind off tonight once again – by making El crack up as she recounted all the times she had pranked and successfully managed to "scare the shit out of Billy".

At around six, they headed back to El's dorm.

Not long after, Max was loudly singing an Adele song obnoxiously out of tune while attempting to do El's makeup. At that moment, surprisingly enough, Eleven realized she was actually feeling a lot calmer despite being less than two hours away from having to face the entire faculty. After all, and especially today, she had to admit that her friends constantly having her back probably, *definitely* had to do a lot with it.

Eleven could feel her eyes start to water at the thought of having such amazing people in her life (*what did I do to deserve them?! Why am I getting so emotional all of a sudden?!*). Her feelings were in a freaking turmoil.

"Ellie, quit blinking so much or I'll smudge this weird stuff all over your eyes and make you look like a fucking raccoon," Max complained teasingly as she tried to make El's almond eyes look even prettier.

She couldn't help the smile appearing on her face at her friend's comment and tried to refrain from moving or thinking at all.

In what felt like a couple of hours later, El was finally allowed to look at her reflection on the medium sized mirror on the wall of her dorm room. Max was standing behind her, looking immensely proud at the results of her friend's makeup and hair. And she had every reason to. Simply put: Eleven looked great.

The soft pink and dark makeup around her eyes and outlining them made them look bigger. The simple coat of gloss on her bowed lips gave her face a cute and natural look. Eleven's brown waves had been brushed back and into a half ponytail so they wouldn't frizz up and annoyingly cover her face like they usually did; now, instead, her medium sized waves fell around her face and back prettily.

El touched the soft material of her dress, smoothing down imaginary wrinkles. The soft pastel pink tone of her knee-long dress was elegant and appropriate for a formal event such as this one. However, the flare of the skirt was juvenile and sweet. As a little girl living in the orphanage, she remembered dreaming about beautiful dresses such as this one, never quite believing she would ever have the chance to wear one. Later on, while living with Brenner, she had come to believe that she was so worthless she didn't deserve anything at all. Now, as she glanced at her reflection in her mirror she wanted to believe that this was it.

*This was the beginning of the rest of her life.*

"You ready to impress all of those old, boring faculty teachers?" Max asked teasingly while elbowing her softly on the side.

Eleven quickly broke out of her reverie.

She could only manage a small smile at that.

*I hope so.*

As she slipped her short heels on, El suddenly felt the waves of anxiety come crashing down on her once again.

*Oh hell no*, El braced herself and stood up straighter. She wouldn't allow her insecurities to make this even harder for her.

"It'll go great," guaranteed Max confidently, somehow sensing her friend's nervousness and voicing the reassurance she desperately needed.

Eleven was sipping on a glass of the fancy champagne they were serving at the venue, trying not to think too much about the speech she had especially prepared for tonight. Despite Will and Max's encouragements and positive opinions about it, Eleven knew that if she were to read it and go over it again, she would find new faults and would probably want to write it all over again.

She was anxious like that.

It suddenly occurred to her that she was in the middle of a group of strangers.

Naturally, that thought did absolutely nothing to calm her nerves as it only allowed another wave (of a different kind of nervousness and anxiety) to crash against her already stumbling serene façade.

Older students mingled around her, smiling at everyone and acting confidently. She wished she had the courage and self-assurance to act like that. El scanned the room for a familiar face (introductions had never been her forte) and felt an immense relief wash over her when she spotted the familiar face of her Developmental Psychology professor among a group of other teachers and older students. Luckily, the nice middle-aged woman saw her too and called her over.

"Jane, it's good to see you," the professor said kindly, giving her a sincere smile, "I must say I'm not surprised to see you here."

Soon enough, introductions were made and El found herself falling into the routine of smiling prettily, listening intently, and answering

questions when asked. She had done plenty of that as a child, after all. The longer she was a part of the conversation, the more she was convinced that the professors and older students were nice enough. However, Eleven couldn't bring herself to get rid of the paralyzing tension she felt accumulating deep within her.

*You can't mess this up. You can't mess this up. You can't mess this up. You can't mess this up. You can't mess this up. You can't mess this up.*

In the span of about eighty minutes, she felt as if she'd talked to more people than she had met during her first semester in college. Smiling faces seemed to stare at her from anywhere she turned and she could feel her own smile faltering.

How could she feel so lonely in such a crowded place?

Eleven knew that all of her feelings were probably exaggerations, but the drain she nevertheless felt was still very present.

She could feel the pressure of wanting so hard for everyone to like her. She could feel the pressure of trying to accommodate her personality to appear as the confident young woman she craved to be.

She could feel the drain of trying too hard to make everything go perfectly.

Everyone was prompted to sit down.

El could feel her hands shaking slightly.

She placed one on top of the other as an attempt to disguise her nervousness and to help keep herself together.

Soft instrumental music played on the background. She instantly recognized the soft tunes of the song that was playing: the girl from Ipanema. How could she not recognize it when *he* used to like listening to that song every afternoon when he came home from work and poured himself a glass of liquor? How could she not recognize the tune when it was the last beautiful sound she heard before being verbally abused by her adoptive father every single afternoon and every night?

Nothing was helping her.

The small, ruthless voice that hadn't made an appearance for months now reared its ugly head, content with her discomfort.

An introductory speech was made by the dean. Then, a couple of professors spoke about how their career changed and touched lives and how important the work of each and every person on the faculty was. A toast was made and everything seemed to be happening in fast motion. El suddenly found herself clapping for the important academic achievements that were being recognized at that moment.

All of a sudden, her Research Methods professor was on the stage and she talking about the amazing projects she'd had the pleasure to oversee that year. Then, the professor was introducing someone and calling them over to the stage.

It wasn't her.

Yet.

Soon, Eleven knew she'd have to stand up in front of all of the people in the room. She'd have to stand up and deliver the best speech anyone could ever give and prove that she deserved to be there.

A girl she vaguely recognized from her Research Methods class made her way to the front of the room, where the stage was. Her pretty navy skirt made her look mature and elegant and as she unfolded the paper where her speech was written and began to read it. She looked just the right amount of nervous. Eleven looked down at her jiggling knee and soft pink dress and felt childish in comparison.

She felt insecure and scared, like a nervous little girl.

Everyone was clapping and her blushing classmate made her way back to her place.

El watched as everything around her seemed to slow down. The professor was once again talking, not talking but saying someone's name.

*Her* name.

*You stupid fool, you'll ruin it like you always ruin everything.*

Eleven sat dumbfounded for a few eternal seconds.

*Just leave already.*

She refused to allow her insecurities to torture her any longer. How did she expect to help others the way she wanted when she hadn't even been strong enough to control her own demons? How did she expect to belong when she was still a coward?

*No.*

Hadn't she been learning how to acknowledge her own feelings and emotions in order to avoid an emotional turmoil from taking over later? Hadn't she been learning and becoming more confident and stronger? Why did she have the sick need to keep comparing herself to others when she knew deep down that there was no other way than accepting herself? If she hadn't experienced all the shit she had, she probably wouldn't have made the choice to help the people she wanted to help. She wouldn't know any better.

*No.*

The ruthless voice went down to a barely audible whisper. Nonetheless, it was still very much there.

Any other time she would have been frozen by the words spewed at her. She'd freeze and flee. She'd effectively self-sabotage her dreams. But this time, this was about her and, at the same time, went beyond her.

The voice of her insecurities went from muffled to nonexistent.

Everyone's eyes were on her as she stood up from her seat at the middle of the room and walked up to the stage. As she concentrated in taking a step at time, for the first time, El did not think about what everyone was probably thinking about her. Suddenly, she was glancing down at all the faces in the room and, for the first time, she didn't see enemies… but just simple people sitting down.

Eleven's voice filled the room and she was surprised to notice that it

sounded a lot more confident than she actually felt, it didn't falter or break. The words she had practiced flowed easily out of her mouth without her needing to glance down at the sheet of paper on the stand and she felt almost as if she was on her own, in the solitude of her bedroom. She continued on, not even noticing the time passing, and finished her speech without a single glitch. Just as she was about to let out a relieved breath, her professor, sitting on a chair in the first row, gave her a thumbs up and a smile.

Everyone started clapping.

El made her careful way down the few steps of the stage and tried to find her seat. The smiling faces of the people in the room no longer felt menacing, but welcoming and she felt a bubble of pure joy swelling up in her chest. Her feet felt a lot lighter, as if she was walking in a dream. Nothing was truly registering on her fuzzy brain and, all of a sudden, she found herself sitting down comfortably.

She saw her professor standing up again to introduce something else, but she was so thoroughly relieved the only thing she could do at the moment was smile.

The lights dimmed and a soft song started playing. Colorful pictures filled the screens in the room. It wasn't until she heard the voices that she finally focused on what was going on in the video.

Familiar faces looked down at her from the big screens.

What in the world?

A tall, pale boy smiled as he took in the emotions reflecting on Jane Ives' blushing face as the video progressed.

Surprise.

Confusion.

Pride.

Happiness.

He was sitting on a strategic spot, expectantly waiting for this

moment to come and to be able to watch her reaction.

Mike had been planning the surprise ever since Eleven had fleetingly mentioned the ceremony and Max confirmed to him just how important it was and how nervous El was about it. One of the things that worried him the most had been the possibilities of her recognizing him amongst the crowd.

Ever since they had grown back together, one of the main topics of conversation had been her project for the semester. It was focused on doing on a small scale what she wanted to dedicate herself to doing once she graduated: Eleven had been counseling orphan children from the small town's children's home. From the beginning, El had enthusiastically thrown herself into the project, to the point that she begun helping out at the orphanage even on days that weren't scheduled in her research.

Her hypothesis for the project had been pretty simple: developing techniques to help children from difficult backgrounds will help them improve their academic performance. However, the longer El went on with the project, the better she realized just how much caring and attention could influence these children's lives. She saw herself in them, scared and sad and tiny and alone.

Even from the outside, it was obvious to Mike just how passionately she felt about this project and the children involved.

Because of that, and because he knew how much all of it meant to her, Mike had gone to the children's home a few days ago with an idea in mind. The original plan had been to take a picture of the children and make them sign it for her. Nevertheless, he hadn't counted on how strongly these kids felt about El – they insisted that each of them should have the chance to say something nice to her and, since some of them didn't even know how to write, Mike had decided to prepare a short video.

The other original plan had been for him to display the edited video on the surprise celebratory barbecue Max was organizing for her friend. However, seeing how pale and stressed El had become as the days passed, and considering that Max's party was going to be three days after the ceremony (Saturday afternoon), Mike had decided to

change it. She deserved this day to be the best of her life, she deserved recognition for all her hard and passionate work.

Therefore, the tall boy had gone out of his way to make the projection of the five minute video possible during the ceremony. Actually, he had gotten lucky because achieving that was easier than he thought it would be – Eleven's Research Methods professor (who had been thrilled at the idea) had helped a lot, probably because she had noticed how much effort El had put into the project.

As the short video came to an end, Mike noticed the bleariness on El's eyes and realized she was barely holding back tears. For a moment, he wondered if he had made a very big mistake (again). The soft smile on her lips, however, soon made him understand that she was very *happy*. And realizing that was enough to make up for all those hours editing the video. Hell, it was all so worth it he wouldn't hesitate to do it all over again.

The video ended and the room filled with the roaring sound of clapping, he saw people turn around and congratulate El.

Amidst all the noise and confusion, nobody noticed a pale, lanky boy slipping away from the event.

Simply put: it had been the best night of her life.

El floated back to her dorm in a daze, replaying the beautiful and simple words the children had said about her.

It had been unexpected and amazing, though mysterious in a way. When she had the chance to talk to her professor, she had profusely thanked her for the video, thinking that she'd definitely had something to do with it.

"It's not me you've got to thank," the middle aged woman said, "I only approved it being shown tonight."

*Will*, El immediately thought, feeling only fondness for her oldest friend, *that's why he left early today*.

Despite it being past eleven o'clock, the dorm building was buzzing with people. For Eleven, however, this made no difference. The only

thing she could think about at the moment was what a nice time she'd had.

With a smile, El entered her darkened bedroom and closed the door.

***Saturday 12th, May 2018 (Morning)***

*Ruego al tiempo aquel momento (I beg the time for that moment)*

*En que mi mundo se paraba (in which my world stopped)*

*Entre tus labios (between your lips)*

*Solo para revivir (Only to relive)*

*Derretirme una vez más (and melt once again)*

*Mirando tus ojos negros (gazing at your dark eyes)*

Sunrays were gently warming her face, foreshadowing the beginning of a pleasant spring. Eleven was currently sitting cross-legged on the floor of a dorm building's rooftop, munching on a huge oatmeal cookie and with her mind lost elsewhere (no surprise there, really). Max had somehow managed to guarantee they could use the rooftop of her building for the day and not be bothered by the other residents.

A soft foreign ballad sounded softly in the background (*where did Max get this music from?*). About fifteen people were sitting or standing around, eating and talking lazily. The feeling of relax the end of the semester brought could be felt as palpably as the milder weather.

Mother's Day was just a day away and El was thinking about how happy Joyce would be to see Will and her tomorrow.

She'd actually wanted to travel on Friday, so they could spend the weekend together. Max insistence, nevertheless, weighted more at the end ("You forced me to confess my surprise for you Eleven! The least you could do is stay for a day and enjoy it") and El decided to stay a bit longer and take the night bus home.

"WILL!" Max shrieked suddenly, startling everyone, as the door to the rooftop opened and the small boy's head peeked at them, a shy smile on his face.

Will had been MIA since Wednesday. El had texted him first thing on Thursday to thank him for the video and for being so nice, but he hadn't replied. She had just figured that maybe her best friend was busy with finals and last minute assignments or something.

The small boy however stood behind the door, making no move to join them. El frowned, his nervous expression was a telling sign that maybe something was very wrong. Dread began pooling in her lower stomach as her brain went over the last few times they had talked and hanged together, desperately trying to spot a sign that could explain his awkwardness now. She looked around, wondering if everyone felt as lost and worried as she was currently feeling at the moment.

As she glanced around the group of people in the rooftop, El' gaze accidentally locked with a pair of dark, confused eyes. Before she had the chance to register everything and blush, Will spoke up.

"I, um, want you guys to meet someone," the small boy said nervously, his awkward shuffling evident even though most of his body was blocked by the heavy door.

The door was opened wider and Will walked in, a bespectacled, olive-skinned boy following him closely. Both of them sat down on the improvised mat on the floor as everyone awaited expectantly.

"This is Bill, my boyfriend," Will said with a blush, "we've been together for three months now and I thought that maybe it was time you guys met him too."

"Nice to meet you Bill!" Max said with a big smile, almost interrupting Will in her excitement.

"Is that a Star Wars shirt?" Dustin asked rhetorically, "Oh we're going to get along just fine."

Introductions were made and soon enough everyone was talking

loudly again.

"I'm starving," Dustin complained after a while, "do you have any more of these cookies? We're almost done with them."

"This was supposed to be a barbecue, the question is: are we having that for lun-" Lucas began asking loudly, looking pointedly at Max.

" –the *real* question is: *when* are we having lunch?" Mike interrupted teasingly, rolling his eyes at the fuming redhead.

The redhead gave them both withering glares. Everyone knew she hated cooking (plus, it was just not her forte).

"The grill is over there," Max said, pointing at it.

"It's waiting for you to unleash your culinary magic on it," El said with a smile, earning a giggle from Max.

"Lucas is *actually* a good cook," the redhead commented to the group, earning some skeptic glances from a few people.

"He is!" Max defended herself.

"Why are you talking about me as if I'm not here?" said Lucas loudly to his girlfriend as he gave her a fake scowl.

The couple's fun banter continued as some people stood up and volunteered to help out with the barbecue.

El was watching them with a smile as Mike suddenly plopped down on the floor next to her.

Afternoon was drawing closer and, despite feeling excited to see Joyce again, El found herself wishing she could have more time to hang out with her friends before vacation began. If there was a way to somehow freeze time while still living in it she would be happy, she thought dreamily.

It was just dawning on her how long three months truly was – if a lot could happen in the span of a few hours, anything seemed possible in ninety days!

She noticed that most of the people with her on the roof seemed sleepy – probably due to the last few academically stressful weeks and them gorging themselves on food all day long. Four of her friends were dozing off on the few beanbags Max had brought. Lucas' head was resting on Max's lap, while she distractedly played with his short hair.

Will was the only one standing, looking out at campus. Bill had left after lunch since he had a plane to catch. El walked over to her best friend and stood next to him.

"I never got a chance to thank you," the brunette girl said with a sincere smile, "it was so thoughtful."

The thin boy looked confused for a second.

"What do you mean Ellie?" he asked, cocking his head to the side.

"The video?" she said but, if Will's expression was any indication, it didn't seem to ring a bell, "the one during the faculty's event?"

"Someone made a video for you and projected it during your ceremony thingy?"

El nodded, feeling confused herself.

"That's something sweet to do, especially during finals week," Will said with a smile, "it wasn't me El."

"Then wh-" she began but cut herself short as she followed Will's hazel eyes to the group of people sitting lazily.

They fell into a comfortable silence for a moment.

"I don't know," the small boy said, turning his kind gaze towards her, "but if you never ask *you'll* never know."

El rolled her eyes at him.

"Love has got you all cheesy Byers."

*Tengo ganas de ser aire (I want to be air)*

*Y me respires para siempre (so you could breathe me forever)*

*Pues no tengo nada que perder (because I've got nothing to lose)*

*Todo el tiempo estoy pensando en ti (I'm thinking about you all the time)*

*En el brillo del sol en un rincón del cielo (about the sun shining in a corner of the sky)*

*Todo el tiempo estoy pensando en ti (I'm thinking about you all the time)*

*En el eco del mar que retumba en tus ojos, soñé (about the echo of the sea rumbling in your eyes, I dreamt)*

Will had already left and it was already a bit late. El had to get going or she wouldn't have enough time to pack up. She hugged everyone goodbye, she would miss them.

"Have a good trip home!" someone shouted as she stepped out and closed the door to the rooftop.

Eleven made super quick work of her clothes, not even folding them as she piled them up into her large suitcase. Soon enough and surprising even herself, she was almost done packing up. Her room looking so bare made something twist inside of her. For some reason, she couldn't muster any excitement.

Who knew she would feel so nostalgic about leaving this after less than a year?

*It's not the place, it's the people*, a tiny voice inside her whispered.

She sat on her empty mattress, feeling her gut clenching and wondering why she felt something was missing.

And, oh, she knew perfectly what was missing. But she was good – *too good* – at lying to herself.

El knew perfectly well that she had been expecting Mike to say something, *anything*, to her. She couldn't have been too naïve again to confuse things again and believe that her feelings were once again one-sided. Right?

But it was her last day on campus and she had patiently waited, feeling the disappointment hampering with the happiness she'd been feeling those months – which had been great and had only seemed to get better.

Will's words jumped to her mind "if you never ask, you'll never know". Hadn't she decided to be brave and stand up to her thoughts and feelings?

*Why should I wait for him to say something?*

El glanced at the numbers on her phone screen, she still had an hour and a half before her bus left. She didn't think it twice before jumping to the door and sprinting out of her dorm room and into the stairs. Eleven frantically descended the flights of stairs and made it to the front door on record time, not even noticing the funny looks the other students and staff gave her on her haste.

Just as she hurriedly exited the building, someone materialized in front of her, causing El to smash face first into their body.

The person steadied her and, unsurprisingly, Eleven glanced up to meet Mike's amused dark gaze.

"Why are we always bumping into each other outside of buildings?!" El blurted out the first thought on her mind.

Mike chuckled at her.

"Why are you running?" he wondered.

*Because I'm tired of waiting around and decided to finally tell you about my undying love…nah, it wouldn't do.*

El blushed feeling a bit embarrassed at her own thoughts.

*And I thought Will was the cheesy one.*

"Why are *you* here?" she asked, trying to dodge his question.

"I thought that someone should come, you know, to help with all those suitcases you'll have to drag down seven flights of stairs," he

said.

Of course, he was right and Eleven hadn't even thought about the odyssey that would have been for her. Her chest warmed up with a familiar feeling. He was still so close.

Without overthinking (a first) she stood on the balls of her feet and kissed him.

At first, he froze at the unexpected contact, just as surprised as she felt. She didn't let go, however, and instead pressed her lips against his a bit more insistently, desperately hoping that it would work out. Soon, Mike eased into the kiss as he cupped El's face in his hands and lowered his face.

And she melted.

Eleven could no longer feel anything but the parts of her in contact with him, like points of heat that radiated warmth and tickly tingles all the way throughout her body. Her fingers also reached up and cupped his structured face, drawing patterns with her fingers, imagining she was creating images with the smattering of adorable freckles on his cheeks.

**A/N: It was great coming this far, thank you all for your continued support (especially EmiliaHG, AliKatt, iAmCC and everyone else who took the time to write something and make me happy)! I'll definitely be back with more as soon as law school lets me have some time to myself.**